REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Prologue
Chapter 1: The Dwarves of the Vlad System
Chapter 2: Space Dwergr
Chapter 3: Dead Ball Sisters!
Chapter 4: Vlad Prime
Chapter 5: Test Pilot
Chapter 6: Outlaws
Chapter 7: Tina and Wiska
Chapter 8: The Black Lotus is Born
Chapter 9: New Firepower
Epilogue
Afterword
About the Author
Newsletter

"We were thinking of Space Dwergr's Skithblathnir model."
"The SDMS-020!
You have an eye for quality, I see!
The SDMS-020 is one of our signature models.
It was first designed about eighty years ago and has been continually improved since then according to customer feedback. It's become a wonderful ship, often chosen for its high reliability and expansion options. And you've picked the perfect time to buy; we just completed a new lot of hulls a few days ago."
Mei
Elma
Mimi
Hiro
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!
Hiro comes to a dwarven shipbuilder to negotiate a mothership purchase...

"We've been waitin' for ya, hon!"
"Hey...hon."
"Oh, hey."
I could feel hot jealousy emanating from the other dwarven engineers, who clearly hated seeing how close I was with the girls.
Wiska
Tina

CONTENTS

Prologue

#1 The Dwarves of the Vlad System

#2 Space Dwergr

#3 Dead Ball Sisters!

#4 Vlad Prime

#5 Test Pilot

#6 Outlaws

#7 Tina and Wiska

#8 The *Black Lotus* is Born

#9 New Firepower

Epilogue

Afterword

REBORN AS A SPACE MERCENARY

I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL

WRITTEN BY

Ryuto

ILLUSTRATED BY

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.5
©Ryuto, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima 2021
First published in Japan in 2021 by
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Benjamin Daughety
ADAPTATION: Dayna Abel
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Stephanie Cohen
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-648-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

WHEN I WOKE UP, someone was nearby.

While I lay in the sweet embrace of sleep, clothes rustled close to my ear. I wrenched my eyelids open to find a woman in classic maid attire, her long hair tied up in a ponytail behind her. Noticing my slight movement, the woman turned to me.

"Good morning, Master." A smile crept onto her face, so faint that I had to look carefully to notice it.

Still half-awake, I greeted our maid. "Morning, Mei."

***

After Mei and I enjoyed a nice bath, we went to the cafeteria to find Mimi and Elma looking relaxed. Maybe *listless* was the better word; they seemed dead tired.

"Good morning, Master Hiro and Mei," Mimi greeted us.

"'Sup," Elma lazily followed.

"Morning, girls."

"Likewise," Mei responded after me.

"You two should take it easy today," I told them. "Get some good rest."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Thanks. Will do."

The two smiled. They were clearly not feeling their best. Not that they were sick; it was just a…feminine issue. Even on the pill, it doesn't stop the monthly beast from rearing its ugly head. I don't really have to spell it out for you, right?

“I’ll be in the cockpit,” I declared. “Mei, stay with the girls after you make breakfast.”

“Understood.”

“Don’t worry too much. I’m a little tired, but that’s it. It’s a light one.” Elma grinned wryly.

The just-as-exhausted Mimi piped up in agreement. “She’s right. Mei, you can stay with him.”

“You sure? Okay. Mei, after you make breakfast and do your usual chores, can you stick with me?”

“Understood, Master.” With Mei’s confirmation, I headed off to the cockpit.

When I entered, a kaleidoscope of color assaulted my eyes. “Wow. Just as crazy and psychedelic as ever.” Currently, the *Krishna* was in a hyperlane on its way to the Vlad System. The main screen displayed an estimated time of arrival in the corner, currently showing about seven hours to go.

Travel through hyperlanes, known as hyperdrive, was typically done on autopilot. We didn’t need anyone to sit in the cockpit and stare at the colors all day, but it wasn’t totally impossible for something unexpected to happen, so we usually had someone sit and monitor our progress through the stars.

“Sooo, seven hours,” I said to myself, opening the console’s Galaxy Map. “I just hope we can take it easy in the Vlad System.” I navigated the map as it appeared on the main screen, bringing up information about our destination.

The Vlad System was quite similar to the Tarmein System, the first galaxy I’d arrived at in this universe. Four planets and an asteroid belt surrounded a G-type star. Two of the planets, as well as the asteroids, contained plentiful mineral resources. Vlad III, a gas planet, was also rich with profitable gas. Thanks to those resources, the Vlad system was one of the most bountiful systems in the Grakkan Empire.

You would think space pirates would run rampant in a place like this, but in fact, there were almost none. This system had shipyards run by Space

Dwergr—manufacturing plants, basically. No pirates survived long here, thanks to them. But for us, they were this system's main draw.

Pirates avoided systems with manufacturing plants. Whenever space pirates were spotted there, the shipyard sent a massive suppressive force to run them out. A journalist once asked Space Dwergr why shipmakers like them put so much effort into repelling space pirates. Their answer: "The skilled engineers of Space Dwergr work around the clock on cutting-edge ships and equipment. We love nothing more than to see the fruits of their labor in action. Why would we ignore free test targets?"

Basically, these scientists saw space pirates as free practice opportunities.

Although capturing a prototype ship could be profitable for space pirates, the very nature of prototypes meant that they were unpredictable in battle. Plus, the scientists were thrilled to kill pirate scum. All of the ship manufacturing plants operated this way, so typically, pirates just stayed as far from them as possible. Pirates wouldn't survive for very long under those conditions.

Engineers had been known to send expeditions as far as two or three hyperlanes away, calling it "long-range testing." They would gladly find and shoot down pirates, then use the parts they harvested as valuable resources. Naturally, they were merciless in their hunts. They even claimed the bounties for research funds.

Free testing, free materials, and free money. Why *wouldn't* they do it?

"Damn those scientists, making the space around them so safe," I grumbled.

It seemed we wouldn't run into any pirate-related trouble this time. I couldn't say it wasn't disappointing—I was bored, for one, and I also wouldn't mind making some quick cash. But we hadn't been able to rest during our vacation in the Sierra System, so maybe this was a good opportunity to do just that. Buying a new ship would likely mean waiting for the shipyard to finish its construction, and I wanted to overhaul the *Krishna*, too.

Mimi and Elma weren't feeling well, anyway. Fortuitous timing, I supposed.

Chapter 1:
The Dwarves of the Vlad System

SEVEN HOURS LATER, the *Krishna* exited the kaleidoscope of hyperspace. We had reached the Vlad System. Through the light of the HUD, Vlad, the G-type star of this system—also known as a yellow dwarf—lit up the cockpit. I know saying "G-type star" isn't very descriptive; it certainly doesn't paint a picture in my head. Basically, it's a star similar to Earth's sun.

"The main shipyard should be on Vlad Prime, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Mei confirmed. "Vlad Secundus and Tertius seem more focused on mining enterprises. I believe we should go to Prime."

"Then I say we set a course for—"

Before I could finish my sentence, an alert sounded.

It wasn't the loud alarm that indicated we were under attack or locked on to; it was the chime that warned us we were being scanned. I checked the console radar to find a single ship turning toward the *Krishna*.

"They're scanning us," Elma said, stating the obvious.

"It's probably fine, right? I hate being suspected without cause, but there's no reason to get mad about it. Mimi, set a course for—" There was another alert. Again, we weren't being ambushed—more ships were scanning us. At some point, two more had joined the first.

"…"

"Umm…I've set the navigation," Mimi offered.

"Everyone, brace yourselves. I'm gonna hit the gas and shake 'em off." With that, I put the pedal to the metal and even fired up the afterburners to ditch our new friends. Based on the radar, they were doing their best to keep up. Not that I cared. "Elma, start charging FTL drive."

"Okay, okay, starting. Countdown: five, four, three, two, one… Initiating faster-than-light drive."

The *Krishna* roared as it accelerated beyond the speed of light.

"I dunno what's going on, but I don't like—"

I was interrupted by the chime of a third alert.

Activating the hyperspace sensors, I detected seven…no, *eight* more ships scanning and tailing the *Krishna*. And more were appearing every second. We dragged a whole train of unknown ships behind us through space, like a meteor's tail.

"Okay, what the hell!"

More and more ships sped after us, as if desperate to catch up. Who in the universe were they?! I didn't understand it at all, and I didn't like the feeling.

"Perhaps they've never seen a ship like this?" Mei suggested, displaying the tailing ships' affiliation on the main screen in front of me. They were all prototypes and patrol ships of Space Dwergr. They bore identifiers like Weapons Development, Hull Design, Propulsion Development, and more, but it was clear that they were all from Space Dwergr.

"Suddenly, I don't love the idea of going straight to the colony." It all reeked of trouble to me.

To be fair, I knew this day would come. The *Krishna* was one of a kind. I'd have to settle this issue somewhere—not that it would prevent nosy pursuers in the future. I might as well confront the problem now to be ready for future occurrences.

We eventually reached Vlad Prime, so I disabled the FTL drive. The trademark *boom* from the *Krishna* was echoed by countless others as the ships chasing us did likewise. And I do mean *countless*.

"Mimi, docking request."

"Yes, sir."

The scream of alerts was getting annoying. I was tempted to send a warning shot to chase them off, but losing my temper now wouldn't get us anywhere.

“Want me to deploy chaffs?” Elma was just as annoyed as I was. It would be less irritating if we were scanned by a public entity like galactic police, but it was downright rude for private ships to be this persistent.

Scanning people willy-nilly didn’t break any laws, but typically, scanning someone meant you were snooping for illegal cargo or bounties. It was like saying, “Are you doing anything shady? You seem awfully suspicious.” Imagine some stranger patting you down and checking inside your bag.

“Let’s not. I don’t like it, but we can submit a formal complaint later. Mei, take note of those ships’ IDs.”

“Yes, do not worry; I’ve already recorded them.”

“Nice.” It might not have been illegal, but it was horrible manners to scan us like that. So many ships doing something so rude to a customer wasn’t a good look for the company.

“They’ve given us permission to dock,” Mimi said.

“Awesome. Let’s do it. Activate auto-docking computer.”

“Activating now, Captain.” The computer took control as the *Krishna* began automatically heading into the hangar. Vlad Prime was a standard torus shape—basically a donut. It was just the same as Tarmein Prime, where I’d met Mimi and Elma.

However, Vlad Prime was larger than most torus-shaped colonies. The hub at the axis of the station was especially huge, with entire factories for shipbuilding set up on it. I wondered if that kind of construction was even legal, but I guess the most famous shipmaker in all the galaxy managed this colony, so it was probably fine.

Having apparently sent docking requests as well, the ships tailing us began to dock after us.

“For God’s sake,” I groaned. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they barged right onto our ship.”

“Yep…” Elma sighed.

I was honestly fed up. *I’d better raise the shields when we leave the ship. I bet they’d find a way to sneak in otherwise.*

***

After docking without other issues, we dealt with the parking procedures and decided to head into the colony right away. Mimi, Elma, Mei, and I would all go to the Space Dwergr showroom together. We had tentatively settled on the Skithblathnir model, but we wanted everyone present to weigh in on furnishings, equipment, and other cutting-edge options.

Ready to go, we opened the hatch.

"What *now*?" Elma demanded.

Over a dozen engineers and scientists waited for us outside. They didn't seem to be from the Port Authority. They argued animatedly with each other as they pointed cameras and other strange devices at the *Krishna*. *Hey, you with the stepladder! Hands off my ship!*

"Um, what in the world…?" Mimi gasped.

"Hiro?"

"On it." I snatched the terminal from my pocket and rang the Port Authority.

"Hello. You've reached the Vlad Prime Port Authority. How may I help you?"

"This is Captain Hiro, hangar thirty-four. We're trying to disembark, but a crowd of lunatics is blocking us from leaving. They're using weird devices to examine my ship, and one of them is even balancing on a stepladder to touch it. Can we get someone to restore order around here?"

"Oh…I see. We'll send someone right away. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"You're damn right it's an inconvenience. We're here to make a twenty-million-Ener deal, so you'd better hustle."

That enormous sum was apparently an effective threat; it wasn't long before several vehicles full of security personnel from the Port Authority rushed over, restrained said weirdos, and hauled them off. Once the coast

was clear, we clambered down the ladder and activated the *Krishna*'s shields.

"That should take care of it for now," I said with an exasperated sigh. "But damn if this doesn't make me worry about the future."

"It really does," Elma agreed.

"Yeah…"

"Indeed." Even Mei agreed with me.

Those guys were creepy, with their bloodshot eyes. Were they trying to reach some sort of development quota? Was Space Dwergr actually a corrupt, dystopian corporation?

"Maybe we should get what we came here for and get out ASAP," I muttered. Yet my grumblings fell on deaf ears.

***

After our liberation from the sketchy scientists, we left the port district and boarded an elevator to the commerce district. The four of us strolled along the street together.

"Is it just me, or is this colony way too cramped?" I complained.

"The ceilings are rather low," Mimi noted, looking up.

Come to think of it, Tarmein Prime and Sierra Prime had much higher ceilings than this station. Somehow it felt like this place was caving in on me.

"That's because dwarves are short," explained Elma. "They don't mind low ceilings."

"Dwarves?" As in those round little old guys? So this universe had elves *and* dwarves?

"Yeah, duh. It's in the name: Space Dwergr. 'Dwergr' is another word for dwarves."

"Ohhh!" I had thought the word *Dwergr* seemed awfully familiar.

Come to think of it, I think it had come up in some Norse mythology I'd read in my old world. *Skithblathnir* sounded like a word they would come up with, too. I might've even seen it somewhere, though I wouldn't have known its meaning. It sounded like some ship or animal ridden by the gods.

"You suddenly look convinced," Elma mused.

"Sorry. I think heard about them from Norse mythology. Makes total sense now."

Thinking back, there may have been some short, brawny men among the gaggle of weirdos earlier. That made sense; a colony made by dwarves would build with their own stature in mind. Maybe they had tried to make this colony just tall enough for normal humans, resulting in this claustrophobic middle ground.

"Norse mythology, huh? Actually, you knew about elves when we first met."

"Hm? Oh, right." Elves and dwarves were common races in video games and stuff. Of course I was familiar with them.

"That is strange, isn't it?" Mimi chimed in. "He came from somewhere else, but he knows about elves and dwarves—from mythology! Elves and dwarves achieved space travel after humans, right?"

"That's right, Mimi. Hiro came from a place that didn't even have interstellar travel technology. How does he know about elves and dwarves?"

I raised an eyebrow. "If that's where we're going, don't you think it's weirder that I know about this whole universe from a video game?"

"Mm…yeah, true. I would think it's more plausible that you came from *this* universe, but had some kind of accident that scrambled your memories."

"So I only *think* I came from another world? That'd be embarrassing… But wait. That wouldn't explain why I don't have that thing in my head. And what about my anomalous genetics?" I tapped the side of my head as Elma furrowed her brow in thought.

"That's true… Huh. Yeah, I dunno."

“A real mystery.”

I didn’t have this universe’s ubiquitous translator implant surgically installed in my brain. It was apparently provided to everyone regardless of background, even the most impoverished. It seemed like almost everybody out here had one.

Stranger still, I didn’t need it. I could understand every language I’d encountered so far. I was a mystery; even the doctor who examined me was baffled. My genetic data was also unlike anything in this universe, making it extremely valuable.

Mimi, Elma, and I had not the slightest idea what, exactly, was rare about it or *why* it was valuable. *Come to think of it, I wonder how the analysis is going? We should head back to the Arein System to see Dr. Shouko again when we’re free.*

“We’ve arrived,” Mei announced.

By the time we’d finished chatting about dwarves and the enigma that was my very existence, we’d reached our destination. It was a massive showroom, with a signboard at its front depicting a white-bearded man in a spacesuit straddling a retro-futuristic rocket. The sci-fi hammer he had slung over his shoulder was especially cheesy.

“I feel like the sign does more harm than good,” I mused.

“It’s tradition,” Elma replied with a shrug. “I hear they’ve used the same logo for hundreds of years.”

“Hmm… It’s not my taste,” Mimi added, striking a truly devastating blow.

SPACE
DWERGR

Not her taste, huh? She looked sweet on the outside, but her fashion sense was totally punk. But hey, everyone had their own preferences. Besides, the colony belonged to the dwarves of Space Dwergr. Anyone who traveled here came to deal with them, so it's natural that they'd lean into their own preferences.

We wouldn't get any closer to a new ship by staring at the sign, so we all crowded inside. A huge counter spanned the front of the lobby, staffed with a whole squad of receptionists. They all had machine parts by their ears that marked them as Maidroids, rather than humans.

"It's packed in here."

Mimi was right; the spacious lobby held a surprising amount of people. There were rough-looking men mercenaries, more mild-mannered merchants, and stocky male dwarves who seemed to be subcontractors.

"Space Dwergr's products might not be pretty, but they're durable and reliable," Elma said. "They're popular with merchants and mercenaries who value dependable ships."

"I see."

We spotted an opening at the counter and walked over together.

"Welcome to Space Dwergr!" The receptionist flashed a practiced Maidroid smile and bowed. *Ooh. Blue-black bobbed hair with straight bangs. I dunno who designed her, but* they *have excellent taste.*

"What brings you to our offices today?"

"We're looking into buying a mothership, so we came to talk business. Right now, we're considering the Skithblathnir, but we're open to discussing options." I took out my handheld terminal. The Maidroid nodded and touched the back of her hand to it. She must have had a reader function in her palm.

"Gold-rank mercenary Captain Hiro," she confirmed. "Understood. Please follow our guide robot."

"Sure."

A panel at the bottom of the counter slid open, disgorging a bowling ball-sized orb. We'd seen these at Inagawa Technologies, too. It looked

sturdy; was it made so it wouldn't break if someone kicked it by accident? Surely there were easier ways to deal with that…

"Right this way, sir."

"O-okay."

It glowed as it rolled ahead, guiding us to the negotiating booth. It navigated the lobby nimbly, avoiding any human contact as it led us to our destination.

"Why are you staring at that guide robot?" Elma asked, sounding annoyed.

"It just makes me nervous."

"I know how you feel." Mimi seemed to agree with me. Clearly Elma was the weird one for *not* staring.

We opened the door to our booth, where we found an elementary school girl wearing a formal suit.

"Um…?" I shut the door again and looked at the guide robot, thinking we had the wrong room. *It did bring us to this one, right?*

"What's wrong?" Elma asked.

"I mean, there's just a little girl in a suit in there."

"You mean…a dwarf woman?"

"Huh?!"

Are all the dwarf women short little cuties? Aren't they supposed to be barrel-shaped and button-nosed? I guess cute female dwarves have gotten more popular in recent years, but jeez, really?

The door burst open. *Oops, she's pissed.*

"Step inside, please, sir." The suited girl plastered a too-big smile on her face—she'd definitely heard my comments—and ushered us into the room. She guided us to our seats, then took her own seat directly across from me with a curt "Excuse me."

"Thank you for visiting Space Dwergr's Vlad Prime office today. My name is Sara, and I'll be helping you today. A pleasure to meet you."

With that, she flashed us a flawless customer service smile.

Chapter 2:
Space Dwergr

"I UNDERSTAND YOU'RE HERE to discuss a carrier ship—that is, a mothership?" Still wearing her artificial smile, she got right to business. I was surprised by how direct she was, but then again, I always appreciated people getting right to the point.

"That's right. We were looking at Space Dwergr's Skithblathnir model," I said. Sara's eyes lit up and she leaned over the table—though she couldn't lean far, given her height.

"The SDMS-020! You have an eye for quality, I see!" she said. "The SDMS-020 is one of our signature models. It was first designed about eighty years ago and has been continually improved since then according to customer feedback. It's become a wonderful ship, often chosen for its high reliability and expansion options. And you've picked the perfect time to buy; we just completed a new lot of hulls a few days ago." Sara rubbed her hands together with a smile.

"Erm…that's quite expensive, though, right?" I asked, referring to the newest line of ships.

She responded, "Of course. The newest line is a cutting-edge model made to fit a wide range of parts. But don't worry, I have some inside information and a proposal just for you, Captain Hiro." The suited girl smiled broadly, and I couldn't help but tense up at the look in her eyes. "You're an up-and-coming, talented new mercenary who shot up from bronze to gold rank. Is that correct?"

"It would be kinda cringey if I bragged about myself like that…"

"Not at all! Confidence is an attractive quality!" Mimi refuted, eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I think it's cringe. That's true, though." Elma agreed with me, but also seemed to agree that I was talented. I couldn't see Mei's face, as she stood behind the couch we were sitting on. Since she was silent, I guess she didn't want to weigh in.

“Is it true?” I asked. “Well, whatever. If Sara or Space Dwergr or whoever sees me that way, then sure. What about it?”

Whether I was talented or not had nothing to do with ship shopping, so I decided to leave it. Besides, it was what others thought that mattered. If Sara and Space Dwergr felt that way, then fine. I wasn’t complaining.

“Yes. If you’d be willing to sign an exclusive contract with us, we could offer you a significant discount.” She kept the smile hung up on her face.

I cocked my head at the offer. “I can’t make a decision unless I know the details.”

“Agreed,” said Elma.

“Yup,” Mimi chimed in.

“To give you the basics, you will use our product as your mothership for as long as possible, come exclusively to us for maintenance when possible, and occasionally provide us with operational data. We will be allowed to advertise using your exploits. Those are our four conditions.”

I considered her proposal. The first condition didn’t seem to be a problem. You don’t exactly buy a new mothership every day.

As for the second, going to their manufacturing centers for maintenance… Meh, that was probably fine. She did say “when possible,” so I assumed it’d be fine to get maintenance elsewhere when Space Dwergr wasn’t nearby.

Third: I doubted giving them data or whatever would be a huge deal, but I should probably ask the others about it. Same with the fourth one, though I did have a specific question about that ask.

“I don’t see any issues with conditions one and two, but what do you girls think about three and four? I wouldn’t mind giving up operational data, but I don’t have enough information to give a hard yes on number four yet.”

Elma answered, “It’s cool with me, as long as we leave out personal data for the sake of privacy. As for the advertising, I don’t care if they use our data for it as long as I don’t have to go around wearing a Space Dwergr

logo. It'd be annoying to act all goody-two-shoes because we don't wanna hurt their brand, or whatever."

"I agree with Elma," Mei added. "But in either case, I believe we need to know the exact size of the discount we would get from accepting these conditions."

"Hmm…Mimi?"

"I don't really understand using us for advertising. How do they use mercenary work for that? We usually just take out pirates and claim their bounties, after all. I don't understand how that benefits Space Dwergr."

Sara listened to our concerns, nodding. "Regarding operational data, as you said, we won't need any of your personal data; we just want practical data on the ship itself. As for the advertising, one example would be publishing the data you provide as practical battle plans. This also gives us the all-important right to priority reporting."

"Priority reporting?" I didn't quite understand that phrase.

"Yes. You see, Space Dwergr isn't just a shipbuilding firm. We manage several different businesses. For example, our manufacturing division alone handles shipbuilding, handheld weapons, alcohol, and more. We have other divisions as well, including entertainment media."

"…Entertainment media?" Suddenly, I had a bad feeling about this.

"Yes! People who live in colonies are crazy for stories about drifters who wander through the stars. Documentaries about mercenaries who hunt pirates are especially popular."

"Mimi?" I looked to Mimi, our resident ex-colonist.

She blushed slightly, her eyes sparkling. "Back on the colony, I did watch lots of documentaries on star-faring merchants, monster hunters, and mercenaries. Could *our* life be worthy of a documentary?! Wooow…!" Mimi was super excited. If she had a tail, it would be wagging. Just watching her light up, it seemed a lot of people really did like mercenary shows.

"What do you think, Elma?"

"Hmm…" Despite Mimi's enthusiasm, Elma looked perturbed. "I think I'd rather not."

“Why not?!” Mimi squealed.

“One look at our crew would tell everyone what our relationship with Hiro is. You want the whole galaxy to know about us? Do you know what that would *mean*?”

It was common to assume that a man and a woman living on a ship together were in an intimate relationship. If we showed up in a documentary, our arrangement would be on display for the entire galaxy.

“Hm? Why is that an issue? I don’t have a problem with people knowing about our relationship.” Mimi seemed to understand, but didn’t care at all. Elma was taken aback. “It’s a little late to worry about that. All of the Port Authority workers at the colonies we’ve been to, along with the entire mercenary guild, know already. If we keep traveling as we are now, the whole galaxy will know eventually.”

“W-eell… I guess that’s true.” Elma was losing ground against the serene and strong Mimi.

“I’m *personally* quite interested in this relationship you’re talking about,” Sara grinned, “but I suppose it speaks for itself. It looks like you’re willing to accept offers from Space Dwergr’s entertainment division. Oh! Of course, you’ll get some side income whenever they film!” The dwarf then formed a ring with her index finger and thumb—she was talking money. *Oh, I see.*

Maybe a Mimi introduction episode would be popular, like a Cinderella story? I think so. Kind of like a real rags-to-riches tale.

“I assume the priority part means that we can’t accept offers from other companies?” I asked.

“That’s correct.”

“You won’t take our data by force, will you? If we don’t like the terms, we can refuse?”

“That’s also correct.” Sara smiled again, but it looked a little strained.

“Master Hiro, let’s accept it! Let’s accept!” Mimi grabbed me as she bounced up and down in excitement. *Whoaaa, look at those babies shake.*

“Yeah, yeah…as long as we can negotiate the conditions. Anyway, let’s talk about ship options and prices.”

“Yes, let’s,” Sara agreed, activating a large holo-display from her tablet. Naturally, it displayed the Skithblathnir, the very ship we were planning to buy. “First, allow me to tell you about the features of the Skithblathnir. Depending on your needs, I may be able to suggest more suitable options.”

Despite her beaming smile, Sara’s eyes had a carnivorous gleam. If I wasn’t careful, she might just sink her teeth into my wallet.

***

“This is our newest line of Skithblathnirs. The ship’s hangar can accommodate two small craft and is outfitted to allow for simple maintenance, part replacements, and reloading ammunition. This work is automated, meaning that the Skithblathnir can operate with a limited crew.” Sara pulled a pointer seemingly out of thin air and indicated the hangar space in the lower back of the Skithblathnir. “These two automated hangars come with the same basic equipment, so if you only need one, you can leave the other empty and use that space to install other equipment. One option would be refitting it as a hangar for surface exploration vehicles.”

“Surface exploration, huh?” I scratched my chin.

That might seem unnecessary for mercenary work, but you’d be surprised. Even if it fit more under the heading of explorer than merc, that didn’t mean I’d never use it. If we received a request from a scholar, for example, we could go out to the frontier and research ancient ruins. I’d never taken requests like that in *SOL* because they seemed annoying, but you never know what you might need to survive.

“We’ll think about that later,” I decided. “Please, continue.” If we could store two ships, then we could bolster our numbers if Elma got her own ship. Besides, we might have another ship fall into our laps, like when I first obtained the *Krishna*. With that in mind, having two small craft hangars seemed like the best idea.

“Very well. Compared to similar carrier ships from competitors, we have a larger utility space where you can freely place equipment. Using the space as a cargo hold gives you a carrying capacity equal to a medium ship,

but you can install other useful furnishings—for example, an auto-refinery to handle mineral resources, or an auto-fabricator to turn refined metals into parts or ammunition."

"Hmm…I'd say that stuff is more for explorers, since they spend their time in open space." As a mercenary who worked near colonies, that stuff didn't interest me. An auto-refinery might be nice if we wanted to make money mining, though. If we could get our hands on high-value ore without too much trouble, that might earn us a lot.

"An auto-refinery might be useful? Maybe?" I pondered.

"Would it?" Mimi asked. She didn't seem to follow, but Elma knew what I was getting at.

"I guess I'd lean toward yes," Elma said. Basically, instead of lazing around on the ship while we were on standby, we could spend that time mining and making some cash. Mimi still seemed confused, but now wasn't the time for explanations.

"In that case," I went on, "we'll need an ore scanner and mining drones. High-grade recovery drones would be good, too… Anyway, that all depends on funds. Getting return on investment is important, but it would also be simple to just use all that cargo space for transport."

"Totally true. Besides, we have higher priorities."

"Indeed," Sara chimed in. "On that subject, the Skithblathnir can accommodate generators up to class six. A carrier ship of this class requires a large generator, but the newest line has twenty percent more output and five percent more fuel efficiency than its predecessor." She touched the holo-display with her pointer and changed the onscreen info.

Huh, so even the standard version comes with a pretty high-performance generator. For its size, it's not much greater in output than the Krishna*'s generator; but to be fair, the* Krishna*'s is insane.*

"I don't want to compromise on shields, plating, or the generator," I said, "so give me the best you've got. Everything else is of secondary importance. I'm not planning to use it as a warship just yet…" Suddenly, Mei tapped me on the shoulder. "…Or are we?" I asked, not turning to face her.

“If the budget permits, yes,” she replied quietly.

“Well, anyway, we’re still prioritizing in this order: shields, plating, generator, cargo space. Next would be recovery drones and mining equipment—” I was interrupted again by another tap on my shoulder. “I mean, uh, weapons. Yeah. Anyway, we want to boost survivability. Like I said before, let’s start with the shields, plating, and generators being the best you have and go from there.”

“Very well,” Sara said. “Then we will use the newest hulls, a three-tiered high-capacity shield generator, military-grade laminated plating, and high-capacity cargo hold. And what of the interior furnishings?”

“Emphasize robust life-support systems and air conditioning,” Mei added. “Reliability is more important than anything else. Standard medical facilities and minimal furnishings for crew rooms. It would be more logical to spend day-to-day on the *Krishna*, which is already furnished. I would be the only one in the carrier ship proper, after all.”

“I see,” Sara said. “For a mercenary mothership, you would want speed and good visibility, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. “Let’s make its FTL travel as fast as possible, too.”

“Very good. With that in mind… Here’s what we’re looking at so far.”

The displayed price was…not quite within budget. It was about twenty-eight million Ener. Leaving only 4.1 million for operational costs and potential repairs was too risky. If the ship was damaged heavily before we could recoup the cost, we would be deep in the red.

“That’s out of budget,” I blurted out. If we used all my savings, then we could just barely get the weapons that Mei wanted, but that would mean even resupplying would be difficult. If possible, I wanted to keep it within twenty-two million Ener.

“What *is* your budget?” Sara asked, her smile suspiciously broad. I wasn’t sure if I should be honest.

“Twenty-two million.”

“I see, I see…” The girl’s grin turned greedy. “If you accept the conditions mentioned earlier, we’re happy to give you a major discount! We

can absolutely come down to twenty-two million."

Six million for those conditions, huh? Hmm…

"I think we can come to an agreement, but—"

"We have some conditions," Mei cut in before I could accept. "I will vet all data collected by Space Dwergr before it is sent. I have a duty to protect my master, so I cannot budge on this point."

"So you don't trust us?"

"That's correct."

Sara and Mei's gazes collided in midair, sending sparks flying. As for me? I just pretended I wasn't there, hoping to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

"I suppose that will work for us," Sara yielded. "As long as we get the operational data we want, we can work with data you've reviewed. Is that fair?"

"Yes. We have no issue with that."

I didn't know why, but Mei was super effective against Sara. She was only built recently, so I doubted she had any connection to an employee of Space Dwergr. Maybe she just had a knack for dealing with her. Mei was an attentive woman, so I doubted she would do anything to make enemies.

"In return, we'll be reporting on you. Since I compromised, it's only right for you to compromise, no?"

"I don't mind, but…" I glanced at Elma. Mimi was into it, and Mei didn't comment. Elma was the only holdout.

Again, I didn't care much. If we were in a documentary, then a lot of people would see the *Krishna*. If someone who built the *Krishna* saw it and contacted us, it might give me a lead on what happened to me.

"I just don't wanna be in it," Elma replied. "Can we work with that?"

"Absolutely!" Sara smiled. "I'll let them know. Next, the weaponry. As you see, the ship has many slots for installing weapons. There is also a single mount for a large weapon, so if you fill it, you'll be quite strong."

"We want an EML on the large weapon mount, medium-bore laser cannons on the medium ones, and seeker missile racks on the small ones,"

Mei replied.

"Huh?" I turned around to face Mei out of sheer shock. "A large EML? For real? Can you aim that?"

"Yes, without issue," she answered expressionlessly.

EML was short for "electromagnetic launcher"—basically, a railgun. In-game, they were super-powered cannons that used electromagnetic force. Railguns shot physical projectiles, so they were naturally slower than lasers. Distant enemies who scanned their trajectory could use their own weapons to knock it off-course. And as the cannon itself was fixed, it could only shoot targets directly in front of the ship. You even had to aim it yourself.

As such, you can imagine they were incredibly hard to aim. But in return, they were insanely strong. If you got a clean hit, you could even destroy a medium ship in one blow. Small ships would pretty much evaporate.

Hard to hit, but ridiculously strong. Basically, a badass finishing move.

"An EML, you say?" Sara asked. "Quite unusual… But of course, we strive to please."

"Conceal all the weapons for us, too," I chimed in. "We want to look defenseless at a glance."

Concealing weapons meant installing them so the weapon mounts were hidden outside of battle. You could say that the *Krishna*'s weapons were concealed, since the lasers and flak cannons weren't visible until they were deployed. Although, given its form and speed, anyone could tell it was battle-ready.

"Understood." Sara agreed. I was grateful for her efficiency here.

But, uh… I was starting to feel like the defensive mothership I wanted was becoming Mei's heavily armed battleship? Adding the weapons she wanted would easily be more expensive than Mei herself. This was starting to get a little bit fishy.

Not that it really mattered. If Mei could aim that EML, then I would absolutely appreciate her backup.

***

"Whew…" I sighed. We had asked Sara to leave so we could discuss things among ourselves and take a quick break. I took a sip of a tea-like drink Sara had offered us.

"Mei…" Elma ventured. I decided to watch in silence.

"Yes?"

"You were planning this all along, weren't you?"

"You're referring to equipping the mothership with heavy weapons, correct? In that case, the answer would be yes, I was." Mei didn't seem sorry in the slightest. Basically, she had been planning this ever since she suggested getting the Skithblathnir from Space Dwergr. Or maybe even before that? She might've hatched this plan back when she agreed to my suggestion of getting a mothership.

"Your willingness to serve is going a bit overboard," Elma warned. "Don't you think it's going too far to strengthen yourself just to help your master?"

"I exist solely to serve him, and I will do everything in my power to do so. That is all," Mei declared, unruffled. Not that I could imagine a Maidroid being ruffled in the first place. Still, she was really bulldozing her way through this argument. It was like she didn't even care to explain herself to Elma.

"Mei, uh…" I nervously cut in. "I don't blame you for wanting to help, but you should probably at least explain your side."

"Yes, Master. In our current environment, my specs are going 98.8 percent unused. One might call it ideal that I have the privilege to look after you from dawn to dusk, and that I can occasionally receive your loving caress, but it would require 1,203 years, 256 days, 13 hours, and 42 minutes to repay the money you spent on me. My manufacturer's warranty is only a twelfth of that."

"O-okay…?" That was weirdly specific. Everything she just said was so overwhelming that it was going in one ear and out the other. If the warranty was a twelfth of that, then…was Mei's warranty a hundred years?

“At this rate, I will only be a powerless trinket who wasted my master’s Ener. As such, I have merely made a request to help me avoid that.”

“That’s one hell of a request.” Mei was spending more of my money than it had cost to buy her… Again, not that it was a big deal.

“This will allow me to help with your work and protect you from danger. By operating the heavily armed Skithblathnir in battle, I can reduce your risk of death by approximately seventy-two percent.”

“That’s rather far from a hundred percent,” Mimi commented.

“Miss Mimi, one hundred percent is impossible. If our only goal were to reduce his risk of death in battle by one hundred percent, then destroying the *Krishna* would be much easier than improving the Skithblathnir.”

“Heh,” Elma chuckled. “Yeah, keeping him out of space would certainly accomplish that.”

“Enough, please.” I stopped the girls from scaring me any further. “So, adding the weapons and the like brings our final price to the twenty-two million Ener from before, with the contract included.”

“That’s too many digits for me to imagine… But it is cheaper than expected, given the amount of laser cannons and seeker missile pods you’ve purchased, isn’t it?” Mimi asked, cocking her head.

She was right; battleship weapons weren’t actually that expensive. The most expensive of the weapons was the large EML, which was 1.2 million Ener. The lasers were 100,000 each, and since we got twelve, they came out to 1.2 million Ener as well. One seeker missile pod was only 60,000 Ener, making a total of 600,000 for ten of them. Altogether, this cost us three million Ener.

By the way, here’s a breakdown of the Skithblathnir: The frame, including the two hangars, was about eight million Ener. The three-tiered shield generator was four million, and the military-grade laminated plating was five million. The class-six high-output generator was 4.5 million; the high-performance recovery drones, and transportation, including hyperdrive, FTL drive, and thrusters came out to 2.5 million Ener. The cargo division, including a cargo maintenance system, was one million. Other specific furnishings and weapon concealment all added two million

on, bringing us to a total of twenty-eight million Ener. With the weapons, a grand total of thirty-one million.

Given the six-million-Ener discount from our contract, we would pay twenty-five million Ener.

The shields, plating, and generators came out to more than the frame alone. It was common knowledge in *Stella Online* that optional parts and extra functions typically cost more than the base ship, though I never knew why. As such, experienced *SOL* players would wait until they had about three times the price of the frame before buying or replacing ships.

A common loop among newer players was: Sell your existing ship, buy a basic new ship frame, use your remaining money on weapons, go to battle. Push a vanilla, uncustomized ship beyond its limits, get shot down, go into debt, and go back to your starting Zabuton.

If not for it being the newest line, our Skithblathnir frame would've only been six million Ener. It also would've only accommodated up to a class-five generator, so the extended capabilities of the new one were naturally more expensive. Getting a higher-output shield generator made the price even higher, too. Those two points were what pushed us over-budget. If not for them, we would've just barely made it. Probably. Maybe. I *think*. Anyway, Mei's suggested weapon additions obliterated any hope of that.

"Wow!" Mimi's eyes glazed over as I explained all of this to her. "The optional parts are more expensive than the ship itself?!" It must've been too much information at once, even if she did seem to understand it.

"Basically, this is why we mercenaries can wreck pirates," Elma explained. "It's the reason our ships are so much better than theirs. They only use the necessary optional parts to get their basic frames going, and they fight with the bare minimum of weaponry. Meanwhile, we're using high-performance parts and a customized ship. Since we're paying so much for weapons and shields, their piddly attacks won't do squat. Our ship can't evade lasers or anything, so we have to be sure it can withstand them and fight back."

"Is that so?" Mimi looked to me. I didn't get hit by lasers in the *Krishna* often, but that was only because I stayed out of their range to begin with instead of evading them.

“This weirdo’s different,” I said, pointing at myself. “He pulls stunts only a select few weirdos can do. What we really have to watch out for are explosive weapons like seeker missiles, and attacks that pierce shields like anti-ship torpedoes. Shields are weak to explosive weapons, so they go down in just a few hits. Get hit by those, and you’re toast. Anti-ship torpedoes come with shield disruptors installed, so they deal damage through shields. Anyway, we’re getting off topic.”

Elma cleared her throat and continued, “Like I said, I don’t want my face or voice appearing in a documentary. A documentary focused on this life is gonna be all about you, Hiro, so I hope you’re ready.”

“Gotcha.” I didn’t know what kind of reporting to expect. I didn’t… okay, I *did* kind of plan to hide my circumstances, but they wouldn’t believe me if I told them I came from another universe, anyway.

The problem, then, was Mimi.

“I’m so excited!”

Never mind; she was all in. I was glad she was eager, but at this rate, she might end up saying something she shouldn’t. *It might be best to keep Mei with her during recording.*

Just as we finished our discussion, there was a knock at the door: Sara had returned. Given the timing, I had to wonder if she was monitoring our conversation, but I decided not to pry.

“I’ve drawn up the purchase order,” she informed us. “Delivery will take about two weeks.”

“Two weeks. I guess that’s about right?”

“Guess so,” Elma said, so I decided to go with it. Purchases went through immediately in-game, but naturally, reality would not be so easy. Two weeks to install generators and the like actually sounded pretty fast to me.

“Is there anything else I can help you with today?” Sara asked.

“Yeah. I want to overhaul the ship I’m using now.”

“Certainly.”

That was a quick response, but I had more to say. “You can probably tell at a glance, but my ship is unusual.”

“Yes. We will likely have to analyze the parts and reproduce them with a replicator. We’re happy to provide that service for free.”

“Uh-huh. And how much are you gonna pay *me* for the privilege?” I smirked.

Sara froze, smile unwavering. *Hey, don’t even try. I know damn well why you were all so brazenly scanning the* Krishna*. It’s clear as day that it’s chock-full of technology you’ve never seen before.* If they were going to overhaul the *Krishna*, they would have to analyze every single part in detail. No doubt they would be delighted to get their hands on all that unknown technology—technology they could then use to improve their own processes.

“I know that ship’s like a mountain of gold to you. How much will you fork over for all the one-of-a-kind tech you’ll get to analyze while overhauling my ship?”

“The overhaul is free.” Sara smiled wider.

“Here I thought combining my overhaul with mothership outfitting would make things easier for all of us. But alas, I suppose fate has different plans…”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! Just a moment! I get it! I understand! The overhaul is free, *and* we will increase the discount on your Skithblathnir! Your three million Ener’s worth of weapons will be complimentary, and we’ll throw in the ammo!”

I turned to Mei. It was best to leave these negotiations to her. *Wow, I’m just getting worse and worse, aren’t I?*

“I believe bringing the total down to an even twenty million would be appropriate,” she declared.

“Hold on a second. That would mean an eleven million Ener discount. I can’t take a third off the price; that’s too much.” Sara looked serious. Yeah, I had to imagine that eleven million might be too much, even for an exclusivity contract and info on the *Krishna*.

“You will have operational data on the Krishna when parked, when traveling, in faster-than-light travel, in hyperdrive, *and* in battle.” Mei whipped out a high-memory data crystal. *Where’d she even get that?*

“Understood. We can make twenty million work.” With that, the once-stern Sara surrendered immediately.

“This is risk management, Master.”

Mei was expressionless as she handed the data crystal to Sara. *Risk management, huh? I can get on board with that. Might as well offer it ourselves for profit instead of waiting them to get it for free, right? And it’s safer to boot.*

“You’re keeping a lot of secrets from me, huh?” I asked.

“Yes. It is for your benefit.”

“Fair, I guess. But don’t you think it’s a little self-righteous to plan things without my knowledge, let alone my permission?”

I could forgive the armed mothership plan, sure. But collecting data and saving it onto a memory device just for a discount was going too far. How long had I been dancing in the palm of her hand?

Mei remained silent. *Okay, then.* “I’ll punish you later,” I warned her.

“Yes, Master.”

Am I hearing things, or did she just sound pleased? Also, all you girls—including Sara—better stop looking at me like that. It might’ve sounded suggestive, but I think I said what needed to be said.

***

After some signing contracts and other boring stuff, we left the Space Dwergr office.

“Well, we’d better find somewhere to sleep,” I said to the girls.

“Agreed.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

We couldn't use the *Krishna*, since it was under analysis and maintenance. As it was both our ship and our living space, we would be without lodging unless we found a place to stay.

"We have to deliver it tomorrow at noon, right?" Elma asked. "We'll need to find a hotel and pack by then."

"We just need the essentials," Mimi noted.

"Right. I'll take my terminal, my tablet, and some clothes." Terminals had wallets installed, so this was really all a man needed. If I wanted anything else, I could go buy it.

"In that case, we'll need to return to the ship at some point," Mimi added.

"Yeah. Let's go back, eat, then search for a hotel," Elma proposed.

"Sounds good to me."

We went down a few floors, passing floors for Space Dwergr's offices on the way, and entered the Port District. Since most people who came to this colony had business with Space Dwergr that necessitated staying a while, there were plenty of lodging facilities. Sara gave us a list of hotels affiliated with Space Dwergr, so we would choose one of those.

Mei was walking in silence a slight distance from us. I still planned to punish her. Who knows whether it would have a real effect or not, but I already had a method in mind…though I'd have to wait until we reached our hotel.

A commotion was waiting for us when we arrived at the *Krishna*.

"I need your support right now!"

"Whoa! Would you cut it out?!"

"Scanning without permission is theft! Arrest them!"

"It's for the sake of research! Move!"

The area around the *Krishna* was in a real uproar. I'd almost call it a riot. There were short, plump men and little girls holding strange devices all trying to analyze the *Krishna*, while similar people dressed in police gear were trying to shoo them away.

"This is insane," I said.

"Umm…"

"*Insane* is definitely a word for it."

"Perhaps we should have put up more of a fight," Mei said, bowing her head in apology. "Dwarves in search of new technology are shockingly persistent."

You don't have to worry about it, really, I thought. *Besides, they can't get close to the* Krishna *like this.*

As I wondered what to do about the mob, Elma raised her voice. "This ship is going to be transported to Space Dwergr tomorrow at noon for an overhaul! Instead of fighting with the police, you should go butter up those overhaul workers if you want a good look at the *Krishna*!"

At Elma's words, the crowd came to a standstill. In the next instant, the researchers all stampeded toward the Space Dwergr office. All that remained were some restrained, screaming researchers, along with some tired cops. *Thanks for all you do, guys.*

"Hey!" One researcher called to me. "You're the owner of this ship, right?! Tell these pigs to let us go!"

"Please! I'm begging you! I need to be on the overhaul team for this ship!"

"Take 'em away, boys," I said with a smirk.

"Will do."

"Aaaargh! Nooooo!"

The police hauled off the researchers. I didn't know how long they'd be there, but I hoped they'd enjoy their stay in the slammer.

***

The next day, having booked a hotel and finished packing, we sent our luggage to our new rooms via the colony's transport system and began our trek there nearly unencumbered.

“Love how easy the transport system makes things,” I mused. “This kind of thing makes you really feel how much we’ve advanced.”

“I can’t imagine a world without a transport system,” Mimi agreed.

“You have to put your stuff on a vehicle, drive it near the place you want it, and then take it out and carry it by hand. It’s inefficient, but some people make their livelihoods doing that,” said Elma.

“It’s a rough job,” I sighed. “I used to do it in the winters when I was a student.” It really was awful. Cold weather, slippery roads…though the pay was pretty good.

“Master…” Mei began.

“Yeah?”

“Please reconsider,” she pleaded.

“Absolutely not.” At my blunt refusal, she looked as sad as an expressionless woman possibly could. She was in the middle of her punishment right now.

“Erm, don’t you think you could forgive her now?” Mimi asked.

“I appreciate her taking initiative to help me out, but she went too far this time. She needs to reflect so this doesn’t happen again.”

Mei was forbidden from doing anything to help me except bodyguarding. Her service toward me was an important part of her very existence. By forbidding that, I was making her go through the apparently painful experience of being reduced to nothing but a guard robot.

I wasn’t totally confident in this method; I had just heard about it during the lecture I got from the Oriental Industries receptionist. Young machines high in faithfulness and ability tended to go wild for their masters. The receptionist taught me a few effective ways of punishing high-performance Maidroids in case something like this happened. An order to do nothing but guard was one such example.

Corporal punishment didn’t do much to such sturdy machines—it would literally hurt me more than it hurt her. Hurting myself by hitting her might make her worry, but I didn’t want to do that. I don’t want to hit people in general, with a few exceptions. And sexual punishment had the opposite effect. Typically, they’d get really into it and one-up you.

“I’ve reflected. From now on, I will do nothing in secret; I will report, contact, and communicate in all things. Please, forgive me,” Mei begged solemnly.

I turned to Elma for advice. With a wry grin, she replied, “Machines won’t lie to those they’re supposed to serve. I’d let it go.”

“I agree. Forgive her, please.” Mimi tugged at my jacket. *If they say so, I guess it’s fine.*

“Okay. Since the girls say so, I’ll forgive you. You did help me out in the grand scheme of things, after all. But from now on, no secrets, even if it’s for the best. Got it?”

“Yes. Thank you, Master.”

Mei’s punishment lasted only ten minutes or so. We hadn’t even arrived at the hotel yet, but with her positronic brain’s high processing speed, it must have felt like an awfully long time. She clearly felt better now that she had my forgiveness. Her downcast look from before was all gone; in fact, she looked almost elated now. Mei was strangely expressive for someone with such a stony face.

We continued our leisurely walk, sightseeing as we went, until we finally reached our hotel.

“Now that’s a fancy hotel,” I said in satisfaction.

“It is!” Mimi agreed. “It looks *very* high-class.”

“It’s fifteen hundred Ener a night with breakfast and dinner included. That’s only about ten thousand Ener for a week.” Elma shrugged.

“I mean, that’s kind of a ton—” Mimi started, but I interrupted her.

“Sierra III’s resort was ten thousand a night per person, right? And now we’re paying the same amount, but for an entire week for three people. Sounds cheap to me!”

“I-I won’t be fooled! It’s expensive! A cheap room would be fifty Ener a night! You can get a room with two twin beds for a hundred-fifty to two-hundred at most!” Mimi said.

Tch. Couldn’t fool her.

“Mimi, the rich tend to spend money when they can,” Elma consoled her. “Besides, people would look down on a gold-rank mercenary if he stayed in some shoddy inn on the edge of town.”

“I-is that how it works?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Wow, really?”

Of course, *I* didn’t know about any of that; I just chose based on the number of rooms and facilities, along with reviews. This was the only place with a training room like the *Krishna*’s, along with suite-style accommodations that could fit everyone in one room. Plus, we got a discount thanks to their partnership with Space Dwergr.

Thanks to Mei’s incredible haggling, we got our new mothership with heavy weapons for less than expected. The *Krishna*’s overhaul was effectively free, too. This left me with more than twelve million Ener in my pockets. Mei had manipulated us into this outcome with her secret scheming, but to be fair, it was for the best. Keeping her punishment light was certainly appropriate.

“C’mon, our luggage is already there,” Elma urged. “Let’s go check in instead of chatting outside the door.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Ulp… Okay.”

Elma and I dragged the still-unsure Mimi into the hotel lobby. The lobby was…fancy? Gaudy? Maybe a bit of both. The waiting area was furnished with plush couches and ornate tables. In front of them was…I guess you could call it an atrium, full of decorative plants. It was a space clearly meant for relaxation. Chandeliers swung from the high ceilings, showering the place with warm light.

“It’s even swankier than I imagined.”

“That’s how they roll,” Elma answered shortly. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I was starting to get a little nervous myself, but seeing Mimi frozen in place helped me relax. Elma showed no sign of apprehension; she seemed

used to places like this. She must have been from a noble or noble-adjacent family. Or maybe she just patronized places like this often as part of her long mercenary career. *I guess I shouldn't assume.*

"Welcome." A handsome, mustachioed man in his forties addressed us from behind the front desk. "Thank you for choosing our hotel today. Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes. It should be under Captain Hiro." I held out my terminal for him to scan with his authentication device.

"Yes, confirmed. Captain Hiro." He smiled. "Would any of the guests in your party like their own electronic keys?"

"I'll take one," Elma answered. "Mimi and Mei, you should, too."

"O-okay."

"Yes."

On Elma's orders, Mimi took out her own terminal, while Mei held out her right hand. The man at the front desk waved his authenticator over both, giving them their keys. I didn't know exactly how they worked, but I assumed they were just modern replacements for card keys to our room.

"A staff member will show you to your room," he informed us. "Your luggage has already been sent up."

"Thanks."

"Please follow me." A young woman wearing a neat maid uniform walked us to our room. She looked like a little girl, but she sounded like she knew what she was doing. No doubt she was an adult dwarf woman. She was cute as a button, but she would be pissed if I treated her like a child. *I'd better be careful.* "This is your room."

Our room was spacious, to be sure. Our luggage sat clustered in the middle of a living room full of tasteful furniture. Several doors were visible, leading to the rest of the suite.

"Wow," I gasped. "It's even bigger than I expected."

"Huh? Um, why are the rooms…?" Mimi stuttered.

"Those doors leads to our bedrooms, right?" Elma asked.

“Yes. This suite has four bedrooms, two half-bathrooms, a dressing room, a walk-in closet, a luxurious bath, and the combined living and dining space we’re in now.”

“Wonderful,” Mei approved. “An appropriate room for my Master.”

“We’re glad it’s to your satisfaction. You may use the terminal there to order room service; the kitchen is open at all hours.” With that, the dwarf maid bowed and wished us a pleasant stay before leaving the suite.

“Let’s get unpacked,” Elma said. “Mimi, come pick a bedroom.”

“Y-yes, ma’am…”

Elma hoisted her luggage and dragged a dumbfounded Mimi off to the back of the suite.

“It seems your room is here, Master.”

“Cool, cool.”

Mei took my luggage in, and I followed her. I came from a pretty humble background myself—really, I was as nervous as Mimi when we saw this place. But complaining wouldn’t do much good now. It was time to hang out and relax for a week.

Chapter 3:
Dead Ball Sisters!

THE FITTING OF THE MOTHERSHIP would take two weeks, while the *Krishna*'s overhaul would take one. We couldn't leave the colony while the *Krishna* was at the shipyard, so I planned to take the week off. The huge suite was plenty luxurious, and it had a top-of-the-line automatic cooker, so the meals were great. What could be better than lazing around with all three of my girls?

Boy, I sure would've loved to do that.

"A summons from the maintenance yard where they're doing the overhaul, huh?"

"Yes," Mei replied. "My apologies, but we've received a message requesting your presence."

Yesterday, we handed off the *Krishna* at noon and spent the rest of the day relaxing and flirting in our hotel room. I had the same itinerary planned for today, but I was confronted with work as soon as I woke up.

"Can't they come here if they need something?"

"I thought the same. I communicated that, but they were insistent that you visit them. Would you like me to contact Sara of Space Dwergr and lodge a complaint?"

"Eh… Nah, let's just go."

I was a customer, but these were space dwarves we were dealing with here. I didn't want to piss off the people who held the fate of my ship in their hands. If things got bad, I could threaten Sara with the blunt force of money, but why cause trouble for myself? Besides, it wasn't like I was doing anything productive messing around with the girls all day.

To be clear, hanging out with the girls was important. However, it would get old if we did nothing but cling to each other. Sometimes you needed to set boundaries with the people closest to you.

"Once I'm dressed, let Space Dwergr know I'm on my way," I directed her. "Send the navigation info to my terminal too, if you please."

"Understood. However, I can show you the way there myself."

"Nah, it's fine. I like to wander around alone once in a while."

This was a colony full of space dwarves! They must have plenty of shops full of crazy stuff. Maybe some close-range power armor weapons? Like a Heat Hawk or something. The imperial nobility favored blades, so maybe a blunt weapon would be nice. If I was up against armored enemies, a mace might be effective. *Man, I've got big dreams. But who knows; if they don't have any stuff like that, I won't be too disappointed.*

***

After getting dressed, I departed from the hotel alone. Mimi was still fast asleep, and with how much Elma drank last night, she wouldn't wake up until lunch. I left Mei with them, so they would be fine. I really did appreciate her at times like this; she was totally dependable.

"Er, so the maintenance yard is this way?" I confirmed my current location and destination on my terminal before displaying the route. Mei had prepared everything for me. Truly an incredible maid. Strangely, I felt somehow as though Mimi was having trauma nightmares off in the distance. *Just my imagination, surely.*

I followed the route through the slightly claustrophobic colony. The maintenance yard was my first destination, but I planned to stay and look around afterward. It was still early, anyway, so I doubted any power armor gear vendors would be open yet.

Along the way, I passed through what seemed to be a downtown shopping district. It reeked so much of alcohol that I couldn't help but frown. *Isn't it dangerous to drink something as volatile as alcohol in a closed space like a colony? I sure hope they took some kind of precautions. I mean, they had to, right? It'd be crazy if the colony caught on fire or blew up just because people drank too much,* I thought to myself.

Once I made it through downtown, the stench of alcohol faded.

“Hm?” Finding it strange, I turned around and stepped back into the area. Again, the stench overwhelmed me. *Wow, now this is insane air conditioning. Is it even AC, actually? I don’t see any specialized machines…but something must be causing this. Can’t say I expected any less of dwarf tech, though it feels like a waste.*

Come to think of it, I recalled a similar waste of technology: that damn gravity sphere. This mysterious air conditioning smelled just like that dumb floating bottle holder. Maybe it put up some sort of shield that specifically blocked the smell of alcohol.

“I’d better get going,” I finally decided.

As I walked along, I realized that the whole district was full of maintenance-related plants. Repair shops for home appliances, laser weapons, power armor, and more maintenance and repair factories lined the street. That downtown area must be a recreational zone for the dwarves working here.

“Hmm. I should get my power armor overhauled soon, too.”

I used my Rikishi Mk. III often enough. It was well maintained but had never received a full overhaul. It’d be a good idea to get that done soon. A less bulky shooting weapon for it would be nice, too. The laser launcher was occasionally too hard to use due to its mass. I suppose I could use the fixed-shoulder laser launchers, but they just didn’t feel the same.

Eventually, I ended up in a low-gravity district. Spaceships were usually massive, so places where they were maintained were kept in low or zero gravity. It seemed this colony was no exception.

Being in low gravity made me want to jump around for the hell of it, but dangerously heavy machines were handled in places like this. People would look at me like I was crazy. It was still fun, though, so children in some colonies would take unused land as their own secret bases.

Even Mimi said she had done something like that with her friends when she was young. The adults always got mad at them for sneaking around.

You could effortlessly leap high into the air in gravity like this, but that also meant an elevated risk of collisions. You needed to move with

more care than in regular gravity. It was also harder to get a solid foothold, so if you moved too fast, you might not be able to stop yourself.

After some cautious movement, I finally arrived at the maintenance yard where the *Krishna* was being serviced.

"What in God's name?" I peeked inside to find a crowd of dwarves glued to the *Krishna*, its plating removed and frame exposed. Some of them were scanning it with strange machines, and others tapped the frame with small hammers. The four heavy laser cannons and two flak cannons had been removed as well, with the transforming parts—the arm-like laser cannon mounts—exposed. Another crowd of dwarves examined them with great interest.

It took a moment for the worker dwarves to notice my presence.

"The pilot's here! Secure him!" One dwarf screamed, prompting all the dwarves in the workshop to run over at once.

"Huh?" *Jeez, this is scary.*

"Graaaah!"

"Move it! I'll secure him!"

"We were first! Let's go, Wis!"

"Bwuh?!" As the unruly dwarves approached, one female dwarf at the back hoisted the dwarf next to her by the collar and lobbed her at me.

"Aaaah!"

"Whoooa!"

I caught the dwarf before she could slam into me, but her momentum still knocked me off my feet in the low gravity. We both tumbled out of the entrance.

Damn, she's heavier than she looks! I thought as my back slammed into a wall. "Hurk…!" I was winded by the impact, now sandwiched between wall and dwarf woman.

As we slid down the wall, I heard the dwarf scream, "Aah! Sir?!"

What the hell is going on? Why do I have to suffer like this? Complaints swirled in my mind as I lost consciousness.

***

Normally, I'm a pretty mild-mannered guy.

No, I'm not lying! I mean, of course I'm different when it comes to pirates who are literally trying to kill me. Sometimes, the situation calls for a heavy-handed approach. But in day-to-day life, with people I've never met—such as service employees—I'm typically not looking for a fight.

Of course, I will change my approach if the person I'm dealing with is being an asshole. For example, that guy I dealt with over Mimi's debt. Or the Port Authority worker who detained me when I arrived in this universe.

They say rich people can't afford to argue. They know arguing only wastes time and gains nothing, so they don't quibble with others unless necessary. The nuances might be a little different, but in this world, I pretty much count as a rich person. As such, I prefer to spend my time in colonies peacefully. *Prefer* being the keyword.

"I'm a nice guy, but even this is too much."

I really had been awfully patient with them. Brazen scans, rude strangers climbing on my ship as soon as I parked, and this morning's summons. Back in Japan, we had a saying: "Poke the Buddha's face three times, and even he will lose patience." The Buddha himself might have gotten angry, but I was totally patient on their third offense here.

"Erm… We are deeply sorry."

Sara sat up properly on her knees before me, expensive suit pressed into oil-stained metal floor of the hangar. Next to her were the factory manager and foreman. We also had the dead ball lady who came flying at me, along with the jackass pitcher who threw her. Behind them were the maintenance staff who had crowded around me.

"I'm a customer, y'know? We might have haggled your price down, but I'm still a big spender who bought your newest model on the spot. Is this how Space Dwergr does business? You're rude to your customers over and over, and then you *assault* them? Or is that just how dwarves are? You summon a customer first thing in the morning and throw a dwarf at them; that's dwarven manners, huh? Right?"

"I swear, we didn't mean to—" Sara looked down in shame, straining to speak.

"Hey, hey, hey, whoa, don't cry! I'm the one who should be crying here! Seriously, I don't want people walking by and thinking I'm the bad guy because you're crying on the floor." They were making it seem like I sat a girl down and made her cry in front of me. Not a good look.

"Anyway, you all stopping your work is inefficient, and I don't like it either. Maintenance staff, get back to work. If you half-ass this job, I'll chase you to the ends of the galaxy and crush you with my power armor. Do a good job, but do it fast. And you'd better not be stealing my tech. Super-fast and super-neat; get to it!" I demanded, prompting everyone but Sara, the factory manager, the foreman, and the dead ball sisters to get back to work.

"Now, as for you…" I glared at Sara, who was still kneeling. "It's not for me to tell you how to do your job. You can figure out how to make this right. Let's see exactly how far good faith and gratitude can get you."

"Yes sir…" Sara trembled as she nodded, tears flowing down her face. The factory manager and foreman followed suit, faces pale. The dead ball sisters had shot past pale and were in the realm of ghostly, but I didn't care.

"For now, keep working on that overhaul, but put the brakes on the Skithblathnir purchase. I'll decide whether or not I'll take it based on how you make up for this. You don't have a problem with that, right? Oh, but I

expect you to meet the same timeline if I do decide to go through with it. Got it?"

"Of course, sir…" Sara hung her head in shame. After confirming the Skithblathnir purchase, they had withdrawn ten million Ener from my account as a deposit. The remaining ten million would be paid after we confirmed there were no issues with the build.

Of course, if negotiations fell through, the initial deposit would be returned to me. If Space Dwergr didn't satisfy me, they would have to keep the custom Skithblathnir build as inventory. It was a huge mothership, so it would cost a fortune to keep it in storage in the colony. They wouldn't be able to use the dock until it was sold, and one could imagine on whom that cost would fall.

No doubt they would be desperate to please.

"There you have it, then. I can't wait to see how Space Dwergr and its employees make this up to me. Depending on your behavior, I might just take off once the *Krishna*'s overhaul is done. Remember…I am a gold-rank mercenary. If you mess up my ship, you know what'll happen. And I'm a damn good face-to-face fighter."

I might've been inattentive before, but I could evade or counter another dead ball like that. I mean, who expects to have a person thrown at them when they go to check up on maintenance?

"Yes sir. I swear, we will—"

"I sure hope so." With that, I turned on my heel and left the workshop. I had planned to shop for weapons to use with my power armor after this, but now I wasn't in the mood. *Might as well go back to the hotel.*

Come to think of it, why'd they summon me, anyway? They said something about "securing the pilot"… Weird. I was just too pissed after they knocked me over. Seeing as how I didn't pull out my laser gun or go on a rampage, I'd say I controlled myself pretty well.

***

Once I got back to the hotel, I told the girls what had transpired.

“Shall I kill those horrid little dwarves for you?” Mei kindly offered, clearly one hundred percent sincere. She’d been filled with silent rage once she heard that I was hurt.

“No need, no need.” *I doubt she’d actually kill them…right?*

“It is awful. But I don’t quite understand…”

“‘Secure the pilot,’ eh?” Mimi was confused. *Right? I don’t understand, either. Even after I took that dead ball.*

Elma seemed deep in thought. I wondered if she had any ideas. “Any clue what they meant?” I asked.

“If they stripped the *Krishna*, I bet the dwarves were trying to discover out how you’re using your thrusters based on their usage frequency. Maybe they wanted to figure out how you do your weird acrobatic movements?”

“But I can guarantee that I’ve protected that data,” Mei rebutted.

“That doesn’t matter. Again, they just have to know how often you use each thruster. Dwarves have a sixth sense for detecting the current state of any metal. They read metal like you or I read a book. They might be able to deduce your strange fighting tactics without any concrete data.”

“So they read metal… I see.” Mei nodded in understanding. She must have connected to the network to collect info on the topic.

“What does ‘securing the pilot’ mean, then?” I asked. “Did they want me to be their test pilot or something?”

“If an engineer wants a pilot, then they might be running some sort of competition.”

“Doesn’t pissing off your potential pilot kinda ruin that?” I wanted to tell these engineers to be more logical. “Either way, I wonder what move they’ll make. I can’t imagine how they’ll try to prove their goodwill after that mess.”

“Though it was extremely uncouth,” Mei began, “I must confess that the crime itself was only a minor injury. Even providing our medical pod’s data would only earn us approximately five hundred Ener. However, it is quite the blunder for such a thing to happen on company property. I imagine they’re racking their brains over how to rectify this.”

“They are dwarves, after all,” Elma said with a chuckle. “I’d bet good money they’ll do something wild.”

Actually, I wonder how elves and dwarves get along in this universe. I feel like the answer would have to be “badly,” right?

“Do you have anything against dwarves?” I asked her.

“Not really. I don’t have any personal feelings about them. It’s just… Don’t get me wrong, but there are a lot of weird dwarves. Their brains are wired in a bizarre way. Inspiration over reason, instinct over logic. Kinda like that.”

“Huh. Well, Sara seems to be one of the more logical ones, right?”

“Probably. Not all dwarves are like that, but some of them are logical enough. It’s just a generalization.”

***

That night, the dead ball sisters visited my room. They were scantily clad.

“Um… Thank you for seeing us. I’m Tina.”

“A-and me, too… My name is Wiska. Please be gentle…”

The one named Tina was a redheaded dwarf with a cute little face. I hadn’t noticed her features earlier, as she’d been covered in oil and grease.

The other one, Wiska, had light-blue hair. I hadn’t gotten a good look at her either, but like Tina, she was cute. *Actually, their faces are almost exactly alike. Are they twins? Guess that’s fine… Doesn’t change what I’m about to say, though.*

“Go away.” I closed the door. Upon doing so, I heard tearful voices from behind it.

“If we go now, we’ll lose our home and jobs!”

“Just hear us out! We’ll do anything!”

They banged on the door. *Gah, cut it out! Maybe I should call hotel security.*

Just as I reached for the communication terminal to call the front desk, Mimi called out to me. “U-um…Master Hiro?”

“Yeah?”

“Umm…why not let them in?”

“Mimi, remember how I was super pissed at Space Dwergr, and how I was waiting to see how they’d make it up to me? Well, clearly, they noticed that I take you, Elma, and Mei around and decided, ‘Hey, he likes the ladies! Let’s take the easy way out!’ They abandoned the perpetrators and conveniently shoved them off on me just because they’re cute young women. Don’t you think it’s a little insulting?”

It was true that I liked the ladies, but this was just wrong. I would have been fine with two dwarf cuties if things had progressed naturally, but I did *not* want them forced on me. Hard no. Besides, it was just wrong to use money and power to seduce someone who clearly didn’t want it.

Now that I thought about it, Mei *was* kind of forced on me, but she was into it—as much as an android can be, anyway. So I guess she didn’t count. *Wow, why am I not mad anymore?*

“You know what, I don’t care. Mimi, I’ll let you deal with them.”

“Huh?”

“All yours.”

“Umm…h-how about we let them in and hear them out?”

I lay down on the couch and tried to relax. *What is it with me and dwarves? It feels like we can’t get along; they just rub me the wrong way, no matter what.*

As I lay on the couch, Mimi brought the weeping dead ball sisters into the room. She took a seat next to me, and our two guests sat down across from us.

"Dwarves seem awfully cowardly," I said, rolling my eyes. "You're almost making it look like *I'm* the bad guy."

"Ha ha…" Mimi laughed dryly as she took care of the dead ball sisters.

Meanwhile, Elma sat at the table, sipping a drink as she glanced over. Mei stood behind me, staring at the dwarf girls. They hugged each other, cowering under the weight of her gaze. She must've been glaring daggers at them.

"Excuse me, Mei?" Mimi started. "Please don't be mean to them."

"I've done nothing." Mei's voice was cold and firm as a glacier. Or maybe a spaceship's plating?

Mimi's reaction was strange, though. Did she feel bad for them because they looked like kids? The question must have been written on my face, because Mimi turned to me with a pained look.

"I lost my money and home because of things I couldn't control, too."

"Mrrrgh…" She knew just how to break me. Worse, I was the one who had put the girls in this situation. *Am I starting to feel responsible for this?* "Wait, hell no. I'm not responsible for this. It's their own fault."

I came *this* close to lumping them in with Mimi and getting all soft. But fine—if nothing else, she felt bad for them. I might as well listen for her sake.

"Fine, I'll hear you out. But first, which one of you smacked into me?"

Kneeling with a straight back just like she had at the factory, the blue-haired Wiska timidly raised her hand. "U-um, that was me."

"Uh-huh. Well, to be fair, you didn't mean to hit me. It wasn't really your fault, so you can sit down."

“O-okay… B-but my sister—” Wiska glanced at Tina, her red-headed elder sister. It seemed she felt too guilty to sit down alone. Even though she wasn’t technically at fault, she had come to back her sister up in making things right. Maybe Wiska was pretty mature, after all. Not that I cared.

“Mm. Okay, well, I won’t force you. You wanted me to hear you out?”

“Y-yes. After what happened, we’re going to lose our jobs and our home…”

“Well, yeah. Who would hire someone who assaulted a customer? Be reasonable.” I didn’t know why they would lose their home too, but I guess it makes sense if it was like a company’s employee dormitory. “And how exactly is that related to them shoving you off on me? Did Space Dwergr tell you to make things better by throwing yourselves at me if you want to keep your job and home, or something?”

“Well, not quite…but we reckoned we might hafta.”

“Excuse me?” So Space Dwergr didn’t tell them to come here? “What was that sob story about your job and home, then?”

“I-I figured it might happen…” Tina stammered.

“So they *didn’t* tell you they’d fire you.”

“N-no, but…”

So this was her own decision. Wow. Seriously? Instead of fixing this, she was probably making it worse! If Space Dwergr knew about this, they would likely faint on the spot. *Also, cut out the sham Kansai dialect. Is this what dwarves are supposed to sound like?*

“So you brought your little sister here to sell yourselves to me of your own volition?”

“S-sell…? Erm, yeah, I guess.” Tina blushed, then went pale, then finally looked down. I looked to Wiska, but it seemed my comment had made her realize the truth of the situation. She turned a ghastly white, sweat rolling down her face.

“Do you understand why I’m angry?”

“Huh? Um, it’s ’cause I hurt ya—”

“Not quite. That’s a big problem too, but what I’m most angry about is that Space Dwergr isn’t keeping its employees in line, and they keep causing trouble for me. Do you understand what that means?”

“Um…no?” Tina cocked her head. Wiska, on the other hand, looked even more shaken—I could see she understood.

“The real problem here is that you, out of nowhere, decided to do something crazy that caused a huge headache for me. Don’t forget that you guys started the day by calling me first thing in the morning, which was an asshole move by itself. Or is that thing on top of your neck totally empty? Huh?” A sinister smile crept across my face. See, when my anger goes through the roof, I end up grinning. It reminded me that smiles were apparently threatening gestures originally, instead of friendly ones—it was more like baring my teeth.

“U-umm, er…” Finally catching up, Tina started to sweat all over.

“Mei?”

“Yes, Master. I’ve already lodged a complaint with Space Dwergr.”

“Good job. That’s my Mei.”

“Your praise is too much.”

I ignored the increasingly pale dead ball sisters and turned to Mimi. “Mimi, I think they’re beyond saving.”

“A-at least they’re eager to take responsibility?”

“That’s a pretty iffy interpretation there. Their bosses didn’t even send them here. They might’ve come here to make it better, but they’ve just gotten themselves in deeper shit.” I heard the sisters gulp simultaneously. “But hell, I can forgive you girls.”

“Huh?!” They gasped as one.

“All you really did was bruise me a little. It’d be petty to hold a grudge forever. I’m not gonna take advantage just because I took a dead ball to the gut. What do you think I am, some kind of thug?” I waved my hand in refusal, and the girls’ faces brightened a little.

It was a practical decision. Like Mei said, no matter how much I hammed it up, all they did was bruise me a little. A quick trip to the medical

pod had fixed me right up. I wasn't seriously injured, so I wasn't actually going to demand money for damages.

While I was explaining matters to the girls, Mei went to the front door. *Oh, they're here? That was fast. They must have run over as soon as we contacted them.*

"I'll forgive you," I said as the door opened, "but will they?"

Several dwarves in suits emerged from the door, carrying a basket of fruit, bottles of alcohol, and some sort of large box.

***

"We are deeply, deeply sorry for all this, sir."

Three of the dwarves bowed before me in apology.

The one in the middle was the sales manager for Space Dwergr's Vlad branch. He was something like Sara's superior's superior's superior, high up enough that you might as well measure his distance from the top rather than the bottom.

To his right was the factory manager I had met earlier today. Finally, the dwarf on the left was Sara's superior's superior or something, a section chief who managed sales to mercenaries. Speaking of Sara, she was standing behind the couch too, along with the assistant manager directly above her, and several others. They bowed their heads as well.

"Your company definitely has an exciting way of doing business. Never a boring day around here, huh? Ha ha ha!" That was my roundabout way of saying, *What the hell are you doing? Can't you give me five minutes of peace?*

"H-ha ha… Thank you, sir." The sales manager smiled ingratiatingly, sweat rolling down his face.

And you, red-headed pitcher girl, stop smiling! I'm seriously not complimenting you! It's called sarcasm.

"I was really surprised when they showed up at my door," I said. "I figured maybe you were trying to offer me two lovely flowers and leave it

at that. And I do love flowers, but I also have my own preferences. When I thought you were trying to foist them on me, I considered grabbing my gun."

"H-ha ha ha, we would never do such a thing. This situation was beyond our expectations." The sales manager pulled out a handkerchief, keeping up his servile smile as he dabbed at his sweat. *Wow. Can't even manage a single poor excuse at this point, can you?*

"I thought so. Why, a company as large as Space Dwergr would never look down on a gold-rank mercenary, *right*? Ha. Ha. Ha."

"Absolutely not, sir. Mercenaries are valuable customers to us, especially those of your status."

"If so, your customer service is too sloppy and reactive, where it should be proactive. I wonder if management is even getting through to its workers. Also, if this is a common problem, I can't help but wonder about the quality of your follow-up service. What do you think about that?"

"O-our follow-up service enjoys extreme customer satisfaction. We are known for being among the best. We pride ourselves on our exceptional staff who go above and beyond the competition to perform excellent maintenance."

"Well, your *exceptional* staff injured me." Now the two dwarves next to the sales manager started sweating visibly as well. "And apparently, she wanted to insult me further by coming to my room and offering her body in exchange for my forgiveness. Why is a person who caused so much trouble walking around doing whatever she pleases?"

"W-well, erm…" The sales manager glanced at the factory manager.

"We ordered her to abstain from alcohol and stay in her home, but it seems she left without permission…"

"Without permission, huh?" I repeated. "So you guys aren't responsible since she left on her own. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"N-no, sir! We would never—" The sales manager rushed to demur.

"Then you take responsibility for not having her monitored, right?"

"Yes. I am deeply sorry." The sales manager bowed his head again, and the others followed suit. *Guess it's about time to make my demand.*

“Okay, I’ll accept your apology. My demands now are for you to work well and fast, and stop causing me trouble without the slightest explanation. Though, really, I shouldn’t have to ask for these things; they’re kind of an unspoken rule.”

“You are absolutely right, sir,” the sales manager agreed, dabbing away his sweat after hearing that I’d accept their apology. *Seriously, though, this is basic stuff.*

“As such,” I continued, “if you have any proposals that would show your sincerity, I would be glad to hear them. We’re planning to keep up our mercenary work, flying all around the galaxy. We might even dabble in commerce, now that we have a mothership.” I made sure to note that I wanted a little extra. After how much they had put me through, it was only natural to want some kind of compensation.

“Y-yes… I will ask the firm if there is anything we can offer. And I will have them hurry.”

“I look forward to hearing back. Oh, and also…”

“Y-yes?”

I grinned at the sales manager, who was trembling in terror as he anticipated what I might say next. *Damn, dude, don’t be that scared. I’m not gonna demand anything else…yet.*

“Why did you guys call me so early in the morning, anyway? I ate that dead ball as soon as I arrived, so I never actually heard.”

“Oh, yes, that. We’re lacking test pilots for the next generation of ships currently in development. The engineers begged to have you as their test pilot right away when they saw your ship. We didn’t want each individual or development team asking you separately, so we gathered each team’s leader at the factory to discuss it with you in person,” the sales manager said, wiping away more sweat.

“Shouldn’t you discuss your ideas internally before asking me about it? Summoning me first is just inefficient and unnecessary. Besides, don’t you think it’s bad manners to summon me to your maintenance yard for personal matters?”

“I offer my deepest apologies.” The factory manager slumped down even further under the weight of my gaze. He must’ve become chief since he was a good artisan; his management skills were clearly garbage. Well, nobody can be good at everything.

“Anyway, we can’t leave until our ship’s maintenance is completed. And we plan to stay until the mothership is done regardless, so I don’t mind being a test pilot…depending on our schedule and the reward offered, anyway. Send a request through the mercenary guild.”

“Thank you very much.” All three of the seated dwarves bowed their heads.

Circumstances aside, I was pretty interested in testing a next-gen ship. I might even see some ships and equipment that hadn’t existed in *Stella Online*. Given the state of things, I might even have a shot of *getting* one. I would absolutely like to try.

“So, that about does it,” I declared. “Contact me once you’ve figured something out. Oh, and I had put a hold on our mothership purchase earlier, but let’s call it a yes for now.”

“Understood. We apologize again for everything.”

“Yeah, for real. I hope nothing else happens. Oh, and about those two…” The dead ball sisters jerked up when I mentioned them. Since all the other dwarves were wearing suits, their skimpy outfits were not so much enticing as simply out of place. “I can’t exactly stick up for them, but at least don’t leave them homeless and jobless. I wouldn’t get any sleep at night.”

“We will take that into consideration.”

With that, the Space Dwergr personnel left. All that remained were the expensive-looking fruit basket, some bottles of alcohol, and the large box.

“Man, I am beat,” I sighed.

“Y’know, you’re not so bad at negotiations after all,” Elma piped up after her long silence. She wasted no time rummaging through the liquor.

“You think? I dunno if that was the biggest win I could get, but it wasn’t bad,” I replied as I peered into the box. Inside were some sort of

vacuum-packed food items, including smoked and preserved meats. There were some expensive-looking canned goods, too. *What is this, some kind of sampler?*

"You picked a good time to stop," Mei complimented me. "You heard them out, made your demands, and wrapped up negotiations on your own terms. Considering they sent the top brass, it would have been a poor idea to reject their apology."

I can't make a perfect analogy here, but the managers they sent were, in military terms, above naval commanders…or even rear admirals. In terms of the Space Dwergr hierarchy, that sales manager was probably more important than Serena was to the military.

Moreover, sales is pretty much any company's star department. And their sales manager was sweating bullets and bowing his head to me. Rebuffing his apology at that point could've made them *more* obstinate instead of less. Can't raise a stink over everything.

"I do feel better hearing that from you, Mei." I looked over at Mimi, who seemed lost in thought. What was wrong here? "Er… Mimi?"

"Oh…sorry. I was just thinking about how I'd like to be able to be as confident as you in a situation like that. You've always been incredible, but watching that just proved it again."

Elma smirked. "So he can massacre pirates in the *Krishna*, wear power armor and go crazy in battle, *and* stand toe-to-toe with a big corporation's higher-ups—you've fallen for him all over again, right?"

"I think that about sums it up, yes," Mimi agreed.

"Cut it out. I don't think I did *that* great."

"Aww, are you embarrassed?" Elma teased. "How sweet. Where'd our big, serious Hiro from before go?"

"I said cut it out. Anyway, these meats and fruits look great. Let's dig in." I tossed a vacuum-sealed pack of smoked meat at Elma to shut her up.

Today tired me the hell out. Time to rejuvenate myself with some delicious food.

Chapter 4:
Vlad Prime

MAN, THAT WRIGGLY SMOKED MEAT was a tough customer. The second I opened the vacuum pack, it started squirming. Mimi screamed like a little girl, too. When we finally managed to eat it, though, it was pretty good, so it ended up in all of our stomachs. It tasted sort of like a rich shrimp. Not cooked— more like sashimi. As for its texture, it was like abalone. Either way, I decided not to think too hard about what it was. I was terrified of finding out *after* I'd eaten it.

After a leisurely breakfast the next morning, I trained at the hotel gym, took a shower, and prepared to go out.

"I think I'll actually look for power armor weapons this time."

"I'll show ya the way, hon!"

"S-Sis, you should be more polite…"

For some reason, the dead ball sisters were in the living room when I got out of the shower. I looked to Mimi, Elma, and Sara for an explanation. That's right, even Sara had invaded my hotel room alongside them.

"Well," Sara began. "It seems these two wanted to apologize to you again rather desperately, so I'm acting as their chaperone. If you are displeased, we'll throw them right into prison." Having noticed how overly familiar Tina was being with me, Sara turned to threaten her, veins bulging from her temples. *Aw, c'mon. I'm not gonna tell you to lock her up just because she was a little impolite.*

"What happened to their punishment?" I asked.

"Due to your intervention, they weren't severely punished. A strong warning, two weeks of prohibition from drinking, and three months of reduced pay. Meanwhile, I wasn't ordered to abstain from alcohol, but I did get two months of reduced pay. The factory manager received one month's prohibition and three months' reduced salary, while the lead researcher is being retrained."

“What’s the deal with the alcohol-related punishments?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is that a heavy punishment for dwarves?”

“Worse than the death penalty,” Tina said, shaking her head. “Oughta be illegal.”

“It’s extremely difficult to go through.”

“I’m just glad I wasn’t punished the same way.”

The dead ball sisters slumped dejectedly, while Sara looked relieved. Incredibly, I guess abstinence from alcohol is a big deal for dwarves. *Maybe your whole race is a little too fond of drinking…*

“Well, sounds like enough punishment to me,” I shrugged. “And if you came back to apologize, then I accept it. But I’m shocked you two still have the guts to come near me after all you’ve done.” Most people would keep a respectful distance, right?

“Actually,” Sara said, “it’s not a formal decision yet, but we were considering dispatching these two as your own personal maintenance crew.”

“I’m sorry; I think I misheard. Come again?”

“Erm, we discussed dispatching them as your personal maintenance crew.”

“Why these two, of all people?” I looked to the smirking redhead and nervous blue-haired dwarf. Wasn’t this a bizarre choice? What were they thinking, saddling me with these troublemakers?

“They’re as skilled as they get,” Sara replied. “They’re also extremely proactive…though as you know, that sometimes a double-edged sword.”

“If you really wanna give me someone, I’ll take Wiska. You can keep Tina.”

“Huh? B-but…”

“Why?! I’m just as cute!”

The blue-haired sister blushed, while the redhead went off. *Gee, I wonder why I didn’t choose you?*

“Besides, how exactly does ‘dispatching a personal maintenance crew’ actually work?”

“Space Dwergr will pay their salaries, as usual,” Sara explained. “A personal crew, but at no cost to you. Of course, we will also take care of their rights to free movement, as they will be accompanying you on your travels after they leave the colony. The only burden on you will be securing and providing a living space for them on the Skithblathnir. Naturally, we will also furnish their living space.”

“Oh?” This was starting to sound like a real bargain. I’d get two skilled maintenance workers essentially gratis, with their salary and even their furniture paid for by Space Dwergr. Getting engineering pros to maintain your ship was a rare thing, indeed. “Just so you know, mercenary work is dangerous. I can’t guarantee your safety, and you’ll probably run into a lot of scary stuff.”

“But we can go all over the galaxy, can’t we?” Tina asked. “See all kinds o’ places, check out the sights, sample some tasty drinks. I’ll leave the colony, even if it’s a smidge dangerous. We caused y’all trouble, so I reckon we should make things even.”

“I…am a little scared, but I do want to pay you back for intervening on our behalf,” Wiska added. “If not for you, my sister would be unemployed and homeless.”

The dead ball sisters were surprisingly sanguine about the risks of being on a mercenary ship. *Can you really decide that quickly? Seriously, it’s more dangerous than you think. Not that I plan on letting the mothership go down.*

I did like that they wanted to repay me, though. Not that I did them any huge favors, but in a small community like the colony, it’s hard to claw your way back up once you’ve fallen down the social ladder.

“I can’t give you an answer right away,” I decided. “Gotta consider synergy with the crew and all that.”

“Of course. If you’d like, you could have the girls guide you around the colony, see if you get along, and get a feel for their character. They offered themselves, and we would love it if this helps you make your decision.”

“I see…”

I looked at the dead ball sisters again. The elder, Tina, was bizarrely overconfident. The younger sister, Wiska, was watching her with visible anxiety. They'd given me pretty much the worst possible first impression, but they seemed easy enough to get along with now.

"Still, even if I was planning to take you both on…" My crew would be a veritable harem. It would be impossible to avoid accusations of being a playboy mercenary. Plus, now that I thought about having them on the ship, things would be a little weird given this universe's crazy porn-game-like customs. "Hey, so, er… When women are on a man's ship, there's kinda this expectation, right? Do you care about that?"

"Not at all, hon. You've already done the four-legged foxtrot with those gals, right? I'd be more scared of putting another man in y'all's crew," Tina answered.

"Yeah, it would cause nothing but trouble. Apart from some special exceptions, anyway." Elma agreed with Tina. *What* special exceptions? *Actually, I have a bad feeling; never mind. My butthole is already clenching up.*

"If you two are cool with it, then okay…" I conceded. "But we still haven't agreed to bring you aboard yet."

"I think we're a darn good deal. Not to toot my own horn, but I'm pretty hot." Tina smirked up at me again. She wasn't bad, but there're different kinds of hot. And if they were indeed twins, then that meant her little sister qualified as hot, too. Except…

"You might be a little too small?" I mused.

"Who ya callin' small?! Maybe you're just too big, hon! We're twenty-seven, I'll have you know. Real mature ladies!"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

That meant they were about as old as me. These pipsqueaks were my peers? Seriously? Dwarves were an enigma.

"They're about your age, Hiro," Elma commented.

"Are we really?" Wiska asked me.

“Well… Yes.” I didn’t want to admit it, but it seemed they were. *Wow, though. Really? That makes Mimi the youngest by far, since she’s ten years younger than me. What about Sara, though?* I glanced over.

“Yes?” Sara asked, a dark aura emanating from her.

“Nothing, sorry.” *Note to self: No matter how young they look, never ask a woman’s age.*

“Actually, I’m the youngest.” Seeing Mei’s almost-but-not-quite smirk was hilarious. To be fair, she was right; only two months had passed since she was made. Totally true.

“Anyway…” I said. “Should I take them up on their guide offer?”

“You’re looking for power armor gear and weapons, right?” Elma asked. “You can take Mei with you. Mimi and I can will go do some shopping and sightseeing.”

“I reckon you’re with me, hon! Wis, you show the gals around.”

“Okay, Sis.”

With that, we dispersed: Mei, Tina, and I went one way, and Mimi, Elma, and Wiska the other.

***

“Really, though, I gotta apologize for yesterday. My bad.”

“I already accepted your apology. Anyway, you should really think a little before you act.”

“Ah ha ha! I hear that a lot from Wis,” Tina laughed wryly, scratching her head.

It seemed she called her little sister “Wis” for short. Wiska called her “Sis,” so I guess Tina didn’t have a nickname. You couldn’t really shorten it to anything but “T,” anyway.

“You should do something about that—whether you join my crew or not,” I warned her. “Though I guess if you wanted to do what you were told, you would’ve done that a long time ago.”

"Now ya get it."

"At least try to learn from experience…" *This is obviously a waste of breath. Now I feel bad for Wiska.*

"If you make trouble for my master, I will waste no time in reporting you to Space Dwergr," Mei threatened. "Be assured that it will affect our assessment."

"Ulp… O-okay, I gotcha."

Tina was awfully obedient with Mei. It seemed like she was still afraid of her from their first meeting. Mei was honestly the most terrifying out of all of us when she was angry, so I would say Tina's level of caution was appropriate.

I was always Mei's first priority. She would keep a close eye on Tina and Wiska, but since they weren't exactly our friends, she wouldn't bother protecting them. Mimi and Elma were close to me, so Mei would naturally take care of them.

"U-umm…oh!" Tina remembered. "Yeah, ya wanted some fancy power armor gear?"

"That's an abrupt change of subject, but yeah. My split-laser gun got sliced in half a while back, and I want something new. Do you know any good weapons shops around here?"

"Cut right in half…? The heck?"

"I can't go into the details, but it was basically a fight between nobles. I just got caught up in it."

"Whoa, I'd better not ask, huh? At least y'all are alive though, right?"

"I guess."

"That's what matters, hon. Anyway, if you want a single-user laser weapon, I know an old shop that's perfect for you. Let's head there first." Tina had looked seriously perturbed when I mentioned nobility, but she quickly recovered and led us along the cramped road. Mei and I followed behind. "How long you been doin' mercenary work?"

"Hm? Uhh…a while." I had started immediately upon arriving in this universe, but that was only around half a year ago. A lot of that time had

been spent in interstellar travel, too.

"A while, huh? But gold-ranked mercs are some of the best, yeah? How much do y'all make?"

"If we're doing well, about a hundred thousand Ener a day."

"Get outta here! A hundred thousand a day is insane!" Tina laughed at that, as if she thought I was joking.

"I'm not kidding. How else do you think I can afford to drop twenty million on a ship? If we have a real special job, like attacking a pirate base or joining a skirmish, we can make even more." The hundred thousand Ener per day figure was based purely on flying around hunting pirates, not being on missions.

"For real?" Tina asked, looking more serious than ever.

"For real."

Upon my confirmation, Tina took my hand and held it against her chest. *Hey! I feel nothing but bones here. What are you, a washboard?*

"Hey, ya ever think about marrying? You can have Wis too, if ya want."

"Marriage, huh? If I wanted to get married, I'd go for Mimi, Elma, or Mei first."

"Oh, so I'm in fourth place, then?"

"What are you talking about? If I had to choose between you and your sister, I'd go for *her* first."

"Why?! I'm cute, too, dang it! Besides, Wis and I look almost the same!" Tina growled at me. I retaliated by poking my finger into her ear. *I oughta have Mei clean her ears later. They're kinda gross.*

"That just makes personality even more important."

"Argh…whatever. Sooner or later, I'll show you what a catch I am."

"There's nothing you can do now that I know you're a gold digger."

"Pssh, what's wrong with that? Making money means you're resourceful, don't it? Ain't it normal for a woman to be drawn to a resourceful man? Love can bloom without money, but money helps."

“That’s a pretty dark view of the world.”

“That’s just life,” she shrugged. “Can’t eat your lofty ideals, y’know. Ya gotta have a livelihood.”

“Fair enough.” I remembered the feeling of Tina’s washboard chest. *Life hasn’t been fair to her.* As if reading my mind, she glared at me.

“That’s not what I mean. My growth spurt ain’t come yet, that’s all.”

“Growth spurt?” I glanced at the other dwarven women around. They were diverse in size, sure, but…*growth spurt*? “You’re twenty-seven, and you haven’t had your growth spurt? Come up with a better excuse.”

“Shut it, you ass!” Speaking of asses, she smacked mine. *Ouch! For such a small hand, that had a lot of force behind it!*

***

“Here’s the place.”

“Oh ho.”

Tina had brought us to a weapons store stocked with a wide range of portable weapons, though lasers seemed to be their specialty. Human mercenaries like me were all over the place.

“It’s more crowded than I expected,” I mused.

“This place has plenty of ready-made weapons, but they also build to order. A lot of the merc folk around here need to stay awhile for the ships, so plenty of ’em use that time to get some made-to-order weapons.”

“Made to order, huh? Hmm…” Having my own custom weapons sounded badass. We had plenty of cushion left in the budget thanks to Mei’s negotiating, so I the idea was tempting. “Well, let’s go see.”

“Sure. Been a while since I last swung by, too.” Tina led us inside. She was starting to sound more and more like someone from Kansai, but maybe that was her natural way of speaking. It wasn’t so thick that I couldn’t understand her, at least. *Still, that’s another point deducted from her.*

“Oh ho. Oh ho ho ho!” The store was bright and spacious. I could tell from the outside that it was big, but it seemed the inside was a huge workshop for making made-to-order weapons.

“What are you, an owl?” Tina laughed at my wide-eyed awe.

Look, a sight like this just tugs at a man’s heart. Laser guns and rifles gleaming on the walls, weapons displayed neatly all over the place… Even when you know they’re used for killing, it’s just too satisfying for words.

“First, I ought to buy a new split laser,” I decided. “Best to replace the broken ones before buying new toys.”

“Yes,” Mei agreed, then pointed. “That seems to be the large optical weapon display.”

“We should get stuff for you while we’re at it,” I replied. “If you see anything you like, grab it.”

“Thank you, Master.” Mei bowed in gratitude. Increasing her battle capability would make all of us safer, and I welcomed that with open arms. If she wanted something, I was more than happy to spoil her.

“How ’bout li’l ol’ me?” Tina asked.

“What do you need a weapon for? And even if you did, I never said I’d buy you one.”

“Cheapskate. Spread the wealth!”

“How about I treat you to lunch? I don’t mind somewhere pricey as long as it’s good.”

“Aww, yeah. I know just the place.”

Look how fast she changed her tune. She’s a calculating one. I don’t really mind paying if I consider it a tour fee, though. Come to think of it, Mimi and Elma hardly ever asked for anything. It was almost refreshing for someone to be so open about what they wanted from me.

Mei didn’t really *want* things; it was more like requesting necessary items for her job, so it wasn’t quite the same. They cost a lot, but she never asked for personal, just-for-fun items.

“They’ve got so many different grenades, too,” I mused. “But I don’t use them much.”

“Right. This isn’t a grenade, but could we purchase it?” Mei brought over a black, metallic…something. *A throwing knife? No, it’s a little too thick and heavy for that. Too thick to call it a nail, too. Maybe you would call this a dart?*

“It’s a metal alloy dart,” she confirmed. “It’s the same material used in power armor plating.”

“Can you use that?”

“Yes. By throwing it, I can even damage power armor. It is also optimal as a concealed weapon.” Mei then showed me bands and holsters made to conceal the dart. *I see…so you hide them all over your body. It looks heavy, but I guess that’s no problem for her.*

“Are you cool with primitive weapons like that?” I asked.

“Yes. Primitive can also mean reliable, after all.”

“True. It certainly wouldn’t break easily.”

There were guns that shot physical bullets instead of lasers, but weapons with complex mechanisms were more likely to break from rough handling. Strange as it might sound, a metal dart could still hurt like hell if thrown with enough force, even it bends from the impact. From that perspective, the most primitive weapons were indeed the most reliable.

“Then we can buy some of those. Would you want an extendable security baton, too? With your strength, I bet that would be useful in close-quarters combat.”

“Yes, thank you. That sounds lovely.” Mei bowed her head. When she looked back up, she seemed happy. Of course, she was still as expressionless as ever, but I could just tell. *Jeez. For someone so expressionless, you sure know how to convince a guy.*

***

Machine intelligence didn’t really desire things, so Mei only ever asked me for necessities. Typically, they were things that would help protect me or improve the service she provided, so the only desire involved would

be the desire to serve. The only problem was when we ended up going overboard because that desire was *too* strong.

In contrast…

"Heeey, hon. How 'bout you buy this for me?" Tina asked.

"No. Why do I have to buy you things?"

"Aww, but I waaant it." She looked up at me with a sly grin.

"You get a three. Try again."

"Oof! Three out of what? You mean three out of ten, right?"

"Pfft." I smirked.

"Three out of a hundred?! That's just rude. Ain't I cute enough?" She thrust out her lower lip, pouting. In terms of appearance alone, she was attractive. Though tied up in a ponytail now, her shoulder-length red hair was surprisingly silky when loose, and her features were small and neat. Her eyes, just as red as her hair, were lively and expressive. And I had to admit: it was charming how animated she was.

"I guess you're more cute than not, sure."

"Bwuuuh?"

"I think you're cute, Tina."

"Huh, wow. Yeah? Yeah, duh." Tina suddenly blushed and started fidgeting nervously. Cute as she was, she was more of the annoying-little-shit kind of cute. *Too* annoying. Maybe a judicious use of rewards and punishment would help maintain the cute side, much like right now.

"Still not buying it, though. Put it back."

"Aww. C'mon, hon, you're loaded. Live a little!"

Just as Tina started to complain, Mei stepped between us. "Miss Tina…"

"Yes, ma'am." Tina jerked up and stood at attention. Ever since that first glare from Mei, she had been whipped.

"Have you forgotten why you have the honor of guiding my master through this colony?"

“No, ma’am. I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“You are here to prove that you are worthy of joining him in his travels by demonstrating that you are useful. That is why Space Dwergr assigned you to him, and I am here to ensure that you’re up to the job.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re right.”

“And despite all that, you are trying to extort money from him.”

“I’m very sorry.” Tina seemed to shrink even smaller than her already tiny stature under the force of Mei’s rage. I guess that’s what happens when you took her selling point—her boundless energy—away from her. Mimi tended to shrink down when she was sad, too.

“Mei, that’s enough,” I said. “She wasn’t being that serious, anyway. She’ll be hard to deal with if she gets too down.”

“As you wish, Master.” Mei backed off.

Tina heaved a sigh of relief. “Phew. Your maid’s awful scary.”

“She’s right, though.”

“C’mon, just a little?”

“Do you think annoying me will convince me to buy you things?”

“Aw, you big meanie.” Still whining, Tina returned the device she had brought over to the shelf. She had explained what it was, but I didn’t really care, so it went in one ear and out the other. I thought I heard something about “photonic resonance” or “quantum harmonizer,” but again, it was all gibberish to me.

“Let’s get to those made-to-order weapons,” I decided.

“Are you fixin’ to get anything in particular?”

We stood in front of the weapons order terminal. Tina pressed forward and stared at the screen. *Personally, I don’t mind, but damn, have you ever heard of personal space?* Given how oblivious she was, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had a bunch of secret admirers.

“I want handheld weapons that work with power armor,” I explained. “Something for close-range combat that’s maneuverable in small spaces. Also, I’d really like something that can stand up to a noble’s sword.”

“That’s a real tough order there,” Tina replied. “Those are high-frequency blades with molecular reinforcement, so you need a super-pressurized material to stand a chance against ’em. That kind of material is sturdy, but it’s also heavy and expensive as all get out. A handgun-sized weapon made of it would weigh around thirty kilograms.”

“That sounds too heavy, even for power armor use.” If it was that heavy and only the size of a handgun, then power armor wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“Yep. That’s why they only use super-pressurized materials in construction. At most, they might use it in some ship plating. If you just don’t want it to get cut, then you could try coating it with the stuff instead, but that takes time, labor, and cash.”

“Huh. Say, could *you* design a weapon like I described? I’ll pay you. Hell, I’ll even buy you that junk from before as a deposit.” It’s best to leave this stuff to a specialist. A weapon made by my own amateurish tinkering sounded cool and all, but I’d feel much safer if Tina did it. Her field was focused on shipbuilding, but she seemed well-versed in materials engineering, so she ought to be able to design a better weapon than I could.

“A handheld weapon, usable with power armor, maneuverable in small spaces, good at close combat, and can hold its own against a noble’s sword, huh? You sure you don’t wanna narrow down the scope a bit here?”

“Let’s call the budget…a hundred thousand Ener. Prioritize maneuverability, close-range capabilities, and defense against the swords. If it satisfies my close-range combat requirements, I’ll pay you ten thousand. If it stands up to noble weapons, I’ll double it. I don’t mind if you use the entire budget, but don’t go over. How about…the less money you use, the higher I rate you?”

“I’ll do my best!” Tina answered.

“Okay, then I’ll leave Mei with you if you need help. Mei, give her info on my power armor and help her develop a weapon. Also…try to get along. See if you can mend things between you two.”

“Understood.” Mei bowed. She was honest, capable, and overall a good girl. Tina grimaced anxiously, but this was an order to her, too. If she couldn’t get along with our existing crew, then I couldn’t let her aboard.

“You two stay here and figure this out with the staff. Mei has final decision power.”

“Yes, Master. As you command.”

“Gotcha. I’ll get that job done!” I could almost hear her say, *And then I’ll get that dough!*

“I’ll catch up with Mimi and the others,” I told them. “Once you finish the order, contact me. We’ll figure out if we want to meet at the ship or what.”

“Yes.”

“Sure thing.”

I left the unlikely pair in from of the terminal and headed off to find the others. If it meshed with their plans, we would meet up; if not, I’d just hang around solo. *First off, gotta tell them.* I whipped out my terminal and opened my messaging app.

All done over here. I left Tina and Mei at the store to get some stuff done. How are you girls doing? I began walking while I waited for a reply. They had said they were going shopping, so I assumed they were looking for groceries and home goods in the shopping district.

“What should I do?” I thought aloud. Should I accept Tina and Wiska into my crew?

Having engineers on board would be extremely useful. If we ever had any mechanical troubles, it would naturally be safer to have someone onboard to deal with them. My problem was…what if they found a way to extract the *Krishna*’s data and send it back to Space Dwergr?

To be honest, I didn’t care that much. Mei could handle protecting any data regarding the *Krishna* and its mothership. If they tried to extract it, Mei would stop them and give them a stern warning. And she would tell me, too, of course. And what would happen then? Cute or not, I wouldn’t let some puny insects suck my blood. I’d crush them or throw them out, and then I’d give their employers a piece of my mind.

Or at least, that’s what I thought I’d do. Who knows if I’d actually do it when the time came? I didn’t really hate Tina’s personality that much. She

was a little unscrupulous, to be sure, but in a way that was carefree and fun. In fact, her overfamiliarity was kind of comforting.

I hadn't spent much time with Wiska yet, but she seemed like the unlucky type. It was easy to imagine that her big sister's antics had gotten her into plenty of trouble over the years. Since she came with Tina to my room the night before, she either loved her sister dearly or was a doormat. I still couldn't be sure.

Either way, whether I accepted them or not would depend on weighing the pros of having in-house engineers against the cons of a non-zero risk of data leakage.

Information on me and the *Krishna* would be all over the universe if I kept up the mercenary life for long, but it would probably be best to keep deliberate leaks to a minimum, right? Though even I wasn't sure if it was totally necessary for a single mercenary to worry so much about that.

I wasn't interested in hiding. I wanted to keep on doing mercenary work on the *Krishna*. In that case, no matter how solid the ship and how skillful my piloting, the *Krishna* would eventually break down unless it received proper maintenance. For that, we needed seasoned engineers.

So basically, keeping people away from the *Krishna* for fear of data leaks would eventually come back to haunt me. Losing the *Krishna* to protect its secrets would defeat the purpose. I would much prefer risking some minor data leaks in exchange for keeping it perfectly maintained forever.

It wouldn't be a problem if it could just stay strong forever without maintenance, but this wasn't a video game anymore. An unmaintained machine would deteriorate, and using it would accelerate the process. If I wanted to keep my ship in fighting shape, I had to compromise.

"Whoops." Before I realized it, I had already walked halfway through the shopping district. I pulled the terminal out of my pocket and checked my messages.

Mimi had responded: *We were just looking at what Wiska will need to stay on our ship. We'll be at it for a while.*

"We haven't given them a firm answer yet…" I grumbled to myself, but the scales were already tipping toward a yes. I had already decided that

the pros outweighed the cons, so it was about time I let my girls know what I was thinking. The final decision was up to me, but I wanted their opinions, too.

Cool, I replied. *I'm just walking around the shopping district.*

I hit send and decided to look around the shops and let my mind wander. Since this was a dwarven colony, there were plenty of interesting craft and merchandise on display. Several shops were selling existing tech with varying artistic spins.

For example, there were automatic cookers made to look like woodwork, embellished laser gun holsters, and spiked shoulder pads. *Wait, what was that last one? Are they for defense? Fashion? I really can't see any use for them other than running around looking like a hoodlum.*

"You've got a good eye, sir. That's our thermal mantle." As I stood frozen, unable to tear my eyes from the bizarre item, one of the dwarven employees accosted me. I couldn't tell his age under his forest of facial hair, but he sounded younger than I expected.

"Thermal mantle. A mantle…like a cloak? This is a mantle?" They just looked like thug shoulder pads to me. *Where's the actual mantle*?

"Yessir. We put considerable effort into making it not *look* like a mantle. Put it on your shoulders, flip the switch, and you can survive temperatures from negative fifty degrees Celsius to positive fifty Celsius."

"That's pretty cool. How is it powered?" *With something like this, I could spend the whole year in a T-shirt and shorts. That's awesome.* If it didn't have the dumb spiked shoulder pads, I might've bought it.

"You put one energy pack on each side, and it works for twenty thousand hours." Twenty thousand hours is over two years—with just two energy packs, that was actually incredible.

"And how much is it?" I asked.

"Well, we put a ton of work into customizing it. It might as well be a new model. How about three… no, two and a half thousand Ener?"

"Hmm…" I could spend that much with ease, but ugh, the aesthetics of it… If I wore it, I'd be overcome by the urge to run around with hand axes screaming thug clichés. I might have to style my hair into a mohawk,

too. *Nah, it just doesn't work. It doesn't suit me in the slightest.* Thanks to my daily training, my body shape was slim but muscular. These thorny shoulder pads were meant for a man with a wider build.

"I'd better not," I decided. "I don't think it'll look good on me. By the way, do you have any normal ones that's aren't modded like this?"

"We do! These are eight hundred Ener. One energy pack gives it thirty thousand hours of charge. I guess a mantle you can just slip on is more efficient, huh?" The dwarf employee brought out a glossy white hooded mantle, made of a material that looked like a cross between vinyl and leather.

"Do you have anything a little more subtle?" This color was just too eye-catching.

"Yeah, sure! You want one with a camouflage feature? Here you go; the chameleon thermal mantle is twelve hundred Ener." This time, he brought me a smooth mantle in a less blinding color. When he flipped a lever on the collar, the mantle's surface flickered into a gray pattern for city camouflage. The colors washing over it in a hexagonal grid were cool; it felt very cyberpunk.

"If I was gonna buy one, I guess I'd choose that one," I mused.

"But look at the design on this one! You'll love it, trust me." The dwarf plonked the shoulder pads on me and plastered on the biggest smile. *How are these shoulder pads even sticking to my shoulders? This is another waste of technology.*

"Nah, I'd rather take the chameleon thermal mantle. In fact, I'll take five to have some backups."

"Five?! Of course, sir!" The man ran off to the back of the store.

That would be three for me, Mimi, and Elma, with two backups. I guess those two would be for Tina and Wiska. Mantles with hoods that have camouflage functions *and* temperature control would probably come in handy at some point. Like if we landed on a planet with a harsh environment, or if we had to touch down on a colony with a broken life-support system. *Stella Online* had events like that, so I figured I may as well be prepared.

“Big spender, we have some very lovely products as well!”

“Hey, I saw him first. Sir, come and browse our wares! Don’t you wanna see?”

“Nuh-uh, my shop is first! Come, sir, right this way!”

A bunch of dwarven merchants had gathered behind me. *Ha ha ha! You guys are aggressive, aren’t you? And to that second woman, your attempts at flirting with me won’t work.*

What a mess this was. I ducked into the shoulder pad salesman’s store, wondering how to escape the sudden attention.

***

It was a hell of a job driving away all those dwarven merchants. Some of them tried to trick me into buying junk, while others hitched the junk to actually interesting things in an attempt to sell both at once. It felt like they were just trying to fleece a tourist, so once I told them I’d come back later with a local friend, they started pushing even harder.

I had to get away from these bloodsuckers just trying make a buck off a rich idiot. Sure, I could afford expensive goods given my current funds, but we didn’t have much space for junk, so I resisted buying anything I didn’t need.

However, I did buy a compact cooking kit. This one could last a long time with an energy pack, and it came with a portable stove the size of a toolbox, an edibility scanner, and a small selection of spices, all in one package. This would probably come in handy if we ever landed on an unexplored planet, too.

I mean, if we really crashed and damaged both the mothership and *Krishna* to the point they were inoperable, we’d be in deep trouble. At that point, we would probably be dead meat with or without a cooking kit. But what if we went to, say, another resort planet? Perhaps I could show off my cooking skills.

I knew it was kind of frivolous. *Kind* of. Either way, I had the compact cooking kit and chameleon thermal mantles sent to the *Krishna*. Or

rather, the shipyard where it was being serviced. Once maintenance ended, they would put the stuff in the *Krishna* for us; no problem there.

"You handled them pretty well."

After I shook off the merchants, I heard a voice behind me. *Wait, that's Elma.* It seemed the girls had finished shopping. Mei and Tina hadn't contacted me yet, so they were probably taking their time working on the bespoke weapon. I appreciated their dedication.

"Were you watching?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a bit. I thought you might buy more junk we don't need, but you exceeded expectations." Elma punctuated this lukewarm compliment with a disappointed shrug.

"I told you he would stay strong," Mimi chimed in smugly.

"You know he's too soft, though. He spent a huge wad of money on us like it was nothing."

"True enough, but that's different from random shopping," I rebutted.

I had paid off Elma's debt for practical reasons, but with Mimi, I *did* have the ulterior motive of getting closer to her. I didn't think it would happen so suddenly, though. Talk about culture shock.

I could tell I was getting used to the customs of this universe, because suddenly I wondered if the twins were virgins. *Humans are adaptable creatures, indeed.*

As if sensing the strange atmosphere, Wiska changed the subject. "Y-you bought a cooking kit, right? Will one of us be cooking?"

"He will be," Mimi answered. "He's a great cook. Raw fish, vegetables, meat…you name it, he can cook it."

"I'm not that great. It's just sloppy man-cooking."

"Oh, but I disagree. It really is delicious."

"Really?" Wiska said, shocked. "How strange. These days it's rare to see someone other than a dwarf cook for real."

"Ooh, yeah," Elma agreed. "Now that you mention it, there are a lot of dwarven chefs. Most of the restaurants out here don't even use automatic cookers."

“Well, that’s not quite right,” Wiska said. “Fresh food is extremely expensive, so most restaurants actually cook the food after the automatic cookers prepare it.”

“Isn’t that just a waste of labor…?” I wondered.

“Haven’t you noticed that food made with automatic cookers is rather dull? Even if it is convenient and generally palatable.”

“Hmm…yeah, I guess so, now that you mention it.” I had never noticed since the Steel Chef 5 was top of the line, but thinking back on it, my first cooker’s food had been a little bland.

Mimi and Elma both cocked their heads.

“Is that true?”

“I never really cared.”

Mimi wouldn’t know since she’d been born and raised on automatic cooker food. And Elma had a taste for junk food, anyway. She didn’t eat much but pizza and steak. Yet she never got fat! Truly, elves are magical creatures.

Wiska smiled. “Non-dwarves wouldn’t understand our sensibilities, I suppose. But I think we’ll get along.”

“Glad to hear it,” I replied. “Speaking of, how about we grab some lunch? Somewhere only a dwarf with excellent taste would go for the best food.”

“Sure, I can take you somewhere. The question is where…” Wiska stared into space for a moment before inspiration struck. “Oh! I know just the place. It’s cheap, it’s good, and you’ll definitely get your money’s worth.”

***

After shooting Mei and Tina a message, we headed to a cozy little restaurant. There were raised tatami booths inside, with each table having a space under it for seating. None of the tatami booths or regular tables were

ordinary. Each one had a black metallic plate set in the middle—its own teppan grill.

Since we had arrived at lunch time, the place was full. We would have to wait for a table to open up. Mei and Tina wouldn't arrive for a little while, though, so that was no issue.

"What kind of restaurant is this?" Mimi asked. "Is it… crêpes? It doesn't quite seem like that…"

"People call it dwarvenyaki," Wiska responded. "We put a bunch of ingredients in the batter, cook it on the flattop grill, and add toppings and sauce while it cooks."

"Dwarvenyaki?" I repeated.

So instead of putting ingredients on the batter and cooking it, they mixed them into the batter. It sounded more like Kansai-style okonomiyaki than Hiroshima-style. Not that I was super knowledgeable about the preparation of okonomiyaki, anyway.

"Yes, that's right. They let customers make it themselves, so races other than dwarves come from all over for it."

"Wow! How exciting!" Mimi was already on board. Elma was watching the other customers make their own dwarvenyaki. Honestly, I was interested myself. Some foods never change, even in other universes.

"Heya!"

"Apologies for making you wait."

While we watched for an open table, our hunger roused by the scent of dwarvenyaki, Tina and Mei arrived. Tina had a wolfish grin on her face; she must have been confident she'd made something good at the weapons shop. With Mei as her chaperone, I doubted any strange personal engineering quirks would be too obvious in the final product. Hopefully. I did have my doubts, since Tina seemed like someone who liked to fly by the seat of her pants.

"Dwarvenyaki, eh? I could've taken ya somewhere more classy. Kinda plebian, don'tcha think?"

"Sis…" Wiska was already annoyed by her sister's antics.

I did say I would treat her to lunch, didn't I? I remembered saying an expensive place was fine, so maybe this spot was too common to fulfill that promise. I hadn't looked at the prices, but it didn't seem like it could be that expensive.

"Ah, it's cool," I said with a shrug. "We can do classy another time. I'm interested in gourmet dwarven cooking, anyway."

"Yeah! I'm interested, too!" As someone whose goal was to eat up all the food in the galaxy, Mimi was naturally drawn to dwarven fine dining. Given that wriggly apology meat Space Dwergr had gifted us, we might be in for more than we bargained for. *I'd better keep my eyes peeled for anything spooky.*

"I gotcha. I'll find a great place."

"And I'll be sure to vet it." Wiska bowed her head while Tina smirked next to her.

It'll be fine, right? It's not like we'll drop tens of thousands of Ener on one meal. I mean, look at this place. According to the wall menu, it looks like five to eight Ener per person. Mei doesn't eat, so that's five of us. Even including sides and drinks, there's no way we're going over a hundred.

Eventually, a big raised-tatami table opened up, and a hostess guided us over. The rest of us were fine, but Mei stood out way too much in her maid gear. *I should really get her another outfit to wear around.*

"I'll leave ordering to you, since you're the experts," I said. "As for drinks, I'd like some iced tea or water."

"I'll have what he's having," Mimi added.

"I think I want some liquor," Elma decided. "What goes with dwarvenyaki?"

"Most of us drink beer, but I do like some dwarven ale mixed with water, like a highball," Tina suggested.

"I happen to like dwarven ale with water, too," agreed Wiska.

"Huh. I'll take the highball, then. Are you girls gonna drink?"

"Aw, hell ye—"

"Siiis…"

“I-I mean, I’ll have some tea. Two-week prohibition, heh. Yeah.” She had forgotten her punishment awfully fast. It was an official reprimand from her company, so she’d be in big trouble if she messed up. Wiska’s warning was serious. “Hostess, bring us three pig balls and three squid balls! Also, four iced teas and one highball!” Tina called out her order.

“Coming right up!” the employee at the counter called back. The hostess looked like another little cutie, so they seemed like two excited little girls shouting at each other. *Still throws me for a loop…*

“Primitive ordering, huh?” Elma mused.

“No point in tapping around on a tablet for stuff like this. Y’all don’t have to use technology for *everything*, y’know.”

“I didn’t expect to hear that from an engineer,” I said with a chuckle.

“I say that *’cause* I’m an engineer. Why bother typing in a console if you can use your voice to directly exchange information? Sounds inefficient to me, hon.”

“Uh…huh?” I half understood and half didn’t.

While we chatted, the hostess brought a bowl of dwarvenyaki ingredients and our drinks. “Thanks for waiting!”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am,” I replied.

After ensuring that everyone had their drinks, Tina raised her tea. “A toast: To new friendships!” she announced.

“Cheers.” I thought it was a pretty lame toast, but this wasn’t the time or place to comment. For now, it was time to pig out on some dwarvenyaki.

***

When I flipped the okonomiyaki to reveal the golden-brown underside, Wiska piped up in amazement, “He is good at this, isn’t he?”

“Our captain is a veritable chef!” Mimi agreed, strangely proud.

“I mean, anyone can do this…”

“So this is, like, one of those foods where it starts off looking like barf—” Elma started, not bothering to cook her own food as she leaned back and quaffed her dwarven highball.

“Better stop there. Say anything else, and you’ll start an interstellar war.” Tina cut in. I didn’t especially like that claim, either.

Dwarvenyaki looked like okonomiyaki, but there were actually some key differences. The taste and texture were similar, but there was something…unfamiliar. It lacked the exact texture of cabbage, and the pork and squid were not quite what I knew from Earth. Something was missing. However, the dried seaweed and bonito shavings, along with the mayonnaise, were just perfect. Overall, it was, like, eighty percent okonomiyaki. Almost-okonomiyaki.

Incidentally, Mei *could* eat, but she would have to dispose of it after. Instead, she abstained from the meal and sat down politely to cook Elma’s portion of the dwarvenyaki. She must have been closely watching Tina and Wiska’s cooking, because her motions already seemed practiced.

“I-I did it!” Meanwhile, Mimi completed her own first dwarvenyaki. She had fumbled the flip so the shape was a little wobbly, but it was still totally edible. “M-Master Hiro, if you’d like, erm…”

“I’ll take a bite.”

“Okay!”

I opened my mouth as Mimi used her metal spatula to cut off a piece. I did *not* want to burn my tongue on the first bite, so I blew on it until I could enjoy Mimi’s handmade dwarvenyaki.

The subtle sweetness of the batter spread through my mouth, combining with a cabbage-like flavor and the rich umami of the sauce and mayonnaise. This was all punctuated by the distinctive smell of nori seaweed. *Mmm…yeah, that’s delicious.* Any parts that disappointed due to a lack of familiar ingredients were more than made up for by the perfect sauce, mayo, seaweed, and bonito-like flakes.

“H-how is it?” Mimi ventured.

“Great. You made it well. With some practice, I bet you could be a good cook.”

“D-do you think so? Eh heh heh…” Mimi excitedly cut off another bite of her dwarvenyaki. What dexterous spatula handling. *She has the potential to be a good knife fighter. Maybe I’ll have Mei teach her sometime.*

“So, hon, are you ready to see the fruits of our labor?” Tina whipped out her handheld terminal, placed it beside the steaming teppan grill, and pulled up a holo-display of the bespoke weapon.

It called to mind a hand axe or a hatchet, but was neither. Normal hand axes and hatchets didn’t have triggers on the handles, for one thing, nor did they have a combined blade and barrel. It looked almost like an oversized handgun—no, more like a sawed-off shotgun or rifle.

Imagine you’d taken a rifle, where you would normally hold the barrel in one hand and gunstock in the other, and you’d cut the barrel so short that you can hold it in just one hand. Then, under the barrel, you attached a wicked-looking blade. Outrageous, right?

“I think it’s cool!” Mimi’s eyes sparkled as she looked at the monstrosity.

I get that; she likes punk fashion, so maybe she likes the raw energy coming from it. But I already looked like a bad guy when I was in the Rikishi Mk. III power armor. If I had this thing, I’d look even more cartoonishly evil.

“It’s light enough that your power armor can hold it with one hand, so I ordered three,” Tina went on. “One for each hand, and the other as a backup just in case something happens to one of ’em.” The sum flashing on the holo-display was perfectly within budget. I hadn’t been too worried since Mei was with her, but she did a good job.

Mei explained, “Its firepower is lacking compared to the split laser, but it is more accurate due to reduced spread. We used the super-pressurized metal only on the blade, since that’s the only part of the weapon used in melee combat. But it should easily stand up to high-frequency reinforced blades, and it is lighter as a result. Combined with your power armor’s brute strength, it should be able to crush other armors’ plating and injure the operator, too.” She didn’t bother mentioning what it would do to unarmored people, for obvious reasons.

“That thing looks pretty evil,” Elma smirked to herself.

“A unified design is real important. Fitting it to your specs is just icing on the cake. Let’s call it… Heh. How ’bout the hatchet gun?”

“Hatchet gun, huh?” I mused. “I guess simple is better than trying to be too unique.” *To make it snappier, maybe… Axegun! Actually, that’s stupid. Never mind.* “Anyway, the specs in the catalog look fine, so all that’s left is to see how it handles. We’ll figure out your reward once it’s delivered and I take it for a test drive.”

“Works for me,” Tina agreed.

Meanwhile, Wiska cocked her head. “What reward?”

“Our man here formally requested that I slap together a nice made-to-order weapon for his power armor. If it fits the minimum specs, I get ten thousand. If it fits all of ’em, I get twenty.” Tina grinned from ear to ear as she explained the deal to her sister.

“So the deal only applies to her?” Wiska looked at me in disappointment.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sorry. I’ll make sure to ask you next time.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yeah, yeah, I promise…”

At this rate, I’m really starting to sound like I plan to take them with me! I looked at Wiska, and she had a big smile on her face. Behind her, Tina wore a shit-eating grin, as if to say “Just as planned!” Mimi was enjoying her dwarvenyaki, and Elma smirked at me. It really felt like we were treating this as a done deal, but I stubbornly refused to confirm it.

“Mei, how was Tina as an engineer?” I asked. “Let’s hear your impressions.”

“Wha—?! Ya can’t just judge me while I’m right here!” Tina’s smug grin turned into sudden panic.

Mei, unperturbed, continuing to tend to her dwarvenyaki as she spoke. “Her engineering knowledge is real; at the least, I believe she’s worthy of being called first-rate. From my observations, she acts not based on flashes of inspiration, as you might think, but builds from a sound

foundation. Her behavior is sloppy, but she is passionate in her work. The trouble she caused is simply the result of her passion and sloppiness on full display."

"I really can't tell if you're praising or insulting me here," Tina complained as she shoveled dwarvenyaki into her mouth.

"It sounds rather accurate to me." Wiska seemed to agree with Mei's appraisal.

I had assumed that Tina was a prodigy who followed her creative whims, but it seemed she was a more careful kind of engineer after all. Now that Mei mentioned it, design aside, the hatchet gun's concept and abilities were well-balanced.

"If you want something real freaky, you'll want Wiska on it."

"Freaky?" Wiska sounded insulted. "That's rude. I just don't like half measures."

"Sure, but you can't over-optimize. Imagine if they put those thrusters you prototyped onto a ship without solid inertial control. The people inside would be spittin' blood!"

"But shouldn't thrusters respond quickly and powerfully?" Wiska rebutted.

"Yeah, but there's a limit…"

The sisters were having a terrifying conversation. *Did I hear something about people vomiting blood? How fast do those things accelerate?! Scary.*

"She looks like a good girl, but trust me, Wiska's the dangerous one," Tina warned me.

"I don't wanna turn into mincemeat in the *Krishna*," Elma said with a shudder.

"Me neither," I agreed.

Either way, we'd learned a lot about the girls during our outing. Once we got back to the hotel, I'd talk to Mimi and Elma about their feelings on Wiska and tell them about Tina. Then we'd all have enough information to decide.

First impressions aside, I didn't have any issue with their personalities, and I was leaning toward letting them on the ship. But I cared about my girls' opinions, so we were going to have a good long talk about it.

"Oh, right," I remembered. "Do you girls mind if I ask you a question?"

"Whatcha got?"

"You two are twins, right?"

"Yup."

"Yes, we are."

The two confirmed at once. *Figures. Their hair color is different, but they look so similar that they might as well be identical. Anyone could tell they're twins.*

"Why do you have such different…ways of speaking?" I asked carefully. "Dialects, I guess?"

"Oh…heh. You *would* ask about that," Tina smirked darkly.

"Should I not have brought it up?"

"Nah, it's all good. Due to some *family circumstances*, we were raised apart until about two years ago. So we had different living environments."

"I see."

"Heh, but despite all that, we both turned out to be engineers. Of course, 'cause we're sisters!"

"Ha ha, that's right."

The girls smiled at each other. *Aww, what beautiful sisterly love.*

"Still, we've been through a lot," Tina added. "Lots of hurdles and dangerous bridges to cross."

"Dangerous bridges? That doesn't sound great," Elma commented.

"It's all in the past now, so it ain't worth mentioning. Not like it matters no more."

“That is for us to decide, not you,” Mei said coldly, breaking her previous silence. She wasn’t wrong, but to be fair, both Elma and I had pretty dark pasts. I didn’t know the details of Elma’s, but I’d say she was definitely a rich girl who ran away from home.

“Oh…um, sure, okay. It’ll be a long story, though.” With that, Tina launched into an explanation of dwarven society.

Dwarves were generally split into two castes. There was the faction made up of large corporations such as Space Dwergr, and another faction made up of miners, artisans, and the like.

“Basically, there’re the well-heeled rich people living in corporate housing, and there’re the rowdy, impoverished artisan guilds. I lived at the guild before I lived with Wis, and she lived in corporate housing. So yeah, the guild is full of old-fashioned rough-and-tumble dudes. Like the mafia, or gangs.”

“I think I get it,” I said. “You got involved with those people, and it was difficult to break ties.”

“Pretty much. I was an engineering tech, so I never had to fight face to face, but I had to do a whole lot of bad stuff to survive. Sometimes I ended up in awful situations. There were fun times, but usually, it was just painful. So…after a while, I was reunited with Wis. I cut ties with the gang and started a new life two years ago.”

“I see,” I said. “But they’re not after you or anything, right?”

“I think I’m good. The place I used to live is hundreds of light years away. I doubt they can do anything to me this far out.”

I glanced to Elma, asking silently if that was right.

She explained, “If a gang puts down roots in a colony, then at most, they *might* be able to influence other colonies in the same system. If they’re affiliated with space pirates, then they might have branches in neighboring systems, too. That said, I’m not exactly versed in dwarven organized crime.”

“They’re the same as any other. No worries there.” Tina gave her dwarvenyaki a deft flip with her metal spatula. *Mmm, that’s a good-looking one.* “Anyway, there you have it. I lived in a guild, and Wis lived in

corporate housing, so we talk differently. It's hard to fix unless I really focus on it."

"Figures," I agreed. "You've probably spoken like that for more than twenty years. Sorry; I didn't mean to dig up your past just to satisfy my curiosity."

"Don't worry 'bout it. Of course it's weird to hear only one twin talking like a guildie." Tina smiled, but Wiska's expression bothered me. She seemed worried, or even sad as she quietly looked on. *What does that mean?* Could it be that Tina hadn't told her everything about her life at the guild?

Either way, it didn't seem right to probe further, so we changed the subject and got back to enjoying our dwarvenyaki. If I wanted to know more, I would wait until we knew each other better. After all, we hadn't told them anything about our own circumstances.

***

"See ya, then." Tina waved to us with a smile.

"Thank you for the meal." Wiska bowed deeply. We said goodbye to them as well before heading back to the hotel.

"Dwarvenyaki is delicious," Mimi sighed. "It was really fun to cook it myself, too."

"I can imagine, especially if you don't cook often," I replied. "I bought us a compact cooking kit; how about we have the Steel Chef make us some ingredients to cook with sometime?"

"I'd love to help!" It seemed her interest in cooking had been piqued thanks to the dwarvenyaki.

Just heating, boiling, and frying wasn't difficult, so maybe I'd teach her when we had time. On Earth, scrambled eggs were a good first dish for a beginner, but I hadn't seen any eggs in this universe. *Maybe I should start by seeing what ingredients the Steel Chef can make.*

“They seem all right,” Elma said, regarding the twins. “They’re apt to get carried away, or get tunnel vision for things that catch their interest, I guess. Are they good engineers?”

“Yes,” Mei answered. “I asked Space Dwergr, and according to them, Tina is an A-rank engineer, while Wiska is an S-rank.”

“So Wiska’s better?”

Mei shook her head at Elma’s question. “No, they are about equal. To become an S-rank engineer at Space Dwergr, one needs not just superb execution of work, but to also some sort of significant technical contribution. I did not look into the details.”

It was very like Mei to say that she “didn’t look into it” rather than that she wasn’t told, or that she *couldn’t* look into it. If she wanted to find out, I bet she could. Not that I’d ask her to; she scared me.

“So there’s no question that they’re both superb,” I said. “What do you girls think? I’m definitely leaning toward bringing them aboard.”

“What’s your reasoning?” Elma asked.

“Basically, I want to take the low-risk, high-reward option. By taking in people who are tied to Space Dwergr, we do take a small risk of them leaking information, but I think it’s negligible. But the pros of having our own in-house engineers outweigh that risk by a lot. Even Mei agrees that they’re first-rate professionals.”

“Uh-huh. And Mimi, how about you?” After hearing my thoughts, Elma put Mimi in the spotlight.

Mimi must have been thinking about it already, because she answered without hesitation. “I think it’s okay. I think we’ll get along well with Wiska and Tina. But if we want to reduce our risk to zero, refusing them is an option. For example, we could find other good engineers who aren’t Space Dwergr employees.”

“I think that will be difficult,” Mei countered. “Engineering is an ever-advancing field. Any engineer working on the cutting edge is almost certain to be working for some corporation. I believe the only top engineers not tied to corporations would be those working in university laboratories.”

“Hmm. Then what if we found a Maidroid like you, or some sort of maintenance robot?”

“That is an option, but purchasing another Maidroid like me would come at great cost. Besides, it would be difficult for multiple machines to serve one master.”

“Is that true?” Mimi asked.

“We have our own circumstances. Temporary measures aside, full-time work will pose problems.” Mei shut up after that. It seemed she didn’t want to tell us what those circumstances were. She might tell us if I commanded her to, but I wasn’t going to force her to talk about things she didn’t want to. But it did make me wonder, so maybe I’d casually bring it up when we were alone.

“So basically, finding engineers who are free agents would be hard,” Elma summarized. “That makes sense; companies pay a pretty penny for skilled engineers.”

“Yes. Self-styled freelance engineers are often crooks, or are unhirable due to personal problems.”

“Kinda like Tina and Wiska, you mean?” Elma chuckled. She was right about that; after their violent acts toward a customer, they were *this* close to being fired. They were on thin ice now.

“Yeah, that’s true,” I agreed. “But even if we asked for other candidates, we can’t guarantee we’d get along with them. I don’t wanna work with some bearded old drunk.” If I had to choose, I’d go for the cute-if-slightly-problematic twins every time. Just as eye candy, of course; it’s not about sex *every* time.

“You’re awfully defensive of them. Does someone have a crush or two?”

“Not exactly… But imagine what would happen to the twins if we asked for someone else. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.”

“Hmm? Well, if you say so, then whatever. As long as Mei keeps an eye on them, I don’t care.”

“Yes. I’ve assigned surveillance terminals to them to ensure they do nothing suspicious in the ship.”

“Surveillance terminals?” I repeated.

“Yes. They are like the terminals that Milo used on Sierra III. They are somewhat lacking in functionality, but they are quite small.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that was a thing.”

Sierra III’s AI, Milo, had used a volleyball-sized floating terminal to communicate with us. It seemed Mei was able to use something similar.

“There is a limit to the number I can control at once, but two will pose no issue.”

“I see…” Mimi chimed in. “Despite what I said before, if Master Hiro says he’s okay with them, then I am, too. I think we’ll get along well.”

“That settles it,” Elma said. “We should prepare rooms for them in the mothership, right?”

“That’s the plan,” I replied. “I assumed we would choose rooms near the hangar.”

“Then we can keep them close by. Let’s make sure both sides are happy with this arrangement.”

“Right. If there’re no other problems, we’ll move forward.”

With that, we settled the matter before even arriving back at the hotel.

Chapter 5:
Test Pilot

THE NEXT DAY, I told Sara we were thinking of bringing the twins aboard.

"Very good. Then I'll proceed under the assumption that they'll be coming with you."

"Yeah, thanks. We'll leave their room furnishings to you, but we do want to work on the rest of the ship's furnishings a bit. Once we figure it out, we'll send the data over. Basically, we want to upgrade everything. Keep an eye out for that, please."

"Understood. We will await your communication."

"Cool." I finished my talk with Sara and hung up.

Now, how should I spend today? As I pondered the question, I felt a sudden weight on my back. *I don't feel anything soft! Must be Elma.*

"Bwuh?!"

"Why do I feel like you're thinking rude thoughts?"

I desperately tapped at the arm in a chokehold around my neck. *It's not nice to read people's minds when you can't even see their face. Also, I'm gonna fall! Lay off! How'd you get so much power into such a tiny arm, anyway?!*

"Haah, haah…" I gasped for breath. "That's an aggressive way to say good morning."

"It's called passion. So, are we going out again today?"

"I was just wondering that myself. Why do you ask?"

"Do you ever rest? We're in such a nice hotel. Kick back and relax or something." Elma sighed and walked around to plop down next to me. She yanked me over, forcing me to lay my head in her lap. *Now this is a pushy lap pillow.* "We're literally on a forced vacation, so stop buzzing around and rest. A good captain knows how to foster love with his crew."

“I didn’t know that was part of the job, but if you say so, then sure.”

“Good boy.”

Doing nothing but hanging around with the girls could be called a luxury, too. Maybe the need to make yourself occupied every time you're free is miserly thinking.

"What's Mimi gonna do?" I asked.

"I'm the one with your head in my lap, and you're asking about *her*?" Elma rolled her eyes. "Ugh, fine. She's planning to do some reading in her room today. That dwarvenyaki from yesterday must've left a hell of an impression on her, because now she's researching all the food in the colony."

"Wow."

Not that she needed to hole up in her room to do that. She could come in here and party with us while she looked at food online.

After a moment's hesitation, Elma added, "…I guess she's letting me have you today."

"Huh."

"Hey!" She stopped rubbing my thigh and slapped me on the head. But she didn't actually seem mad; the corners of her lips curled into a grin. It seemed we had figured out our plans for today, so it was time to relax and have fun.

***

After "having fun" with Elma all day, the next day was dedicated to Mimi's plans—an all-day binge-eating tour.

"I read that dwarven cooking is famous for its complexity," she said.

"Makes sense. The taste of food can change a lot based on how much it's cooked and how it's seasoned, so they must have their preferences."

"Do you think so?"

"I absolutely do." As we talked, we headed to a street lined with food stalls, close to the artisans' street we visited on our last shopping excursion. "Whoooa. Now this is something."

“It looks fun!”

The street felt like a festival in full swing. Many stalls had foods such as takoyaki and yakisoba, with cheap tables and chairs set up here and there for people to eat. The system was basically to buy some street food from one of the stands, pick whatever table, and chow down.

“Look, look! Let’s eat that!” Mimi yanked at my arm as she pointed to a stall with a meat skewer on its sign. The line wound way down the street; it was clearly quite popular.

“Sure. Let’s head on over.”

“Okay!”

We bought a few things to try: a skewer with some meat of unknown origin, something takoyaki-like, something yakisoba-like, and more. We settled down at an open table with our spoils.

“Let’s eat! I say we start with the meat skewers.”

“Yaaay!”

I opened the package, which felt like flimsy cardboard, and grabbed a mystery-meat skewer. Its beautifully charred surface was covered in spices, making it look, well…spicy.

“This actually doesn’t look bad,” I mused.

“It’s delicious!”

The meat was surprisingly tough. It seemed sinewy, but that made each bite more satisfying. It was meat, and it made sure that you knew it. I certainly preferred this over meat that was blandly tender.

“Yeah, I like it. Never underestimate dwarf food.”

“This is good, too!”

The takoyaki-like food had the taste and texture of octopus. I wasn’t sure if it was actually octopus, but it was takoyaki for sure. The yakisoba clone came in rectangular paper packaging. The noodles themselves had a sour yet salty flavor.

“I’m not a fan of this one,” I grumbled.

“But it’s good,” Mimi insisted.

“Maybe, but sour foods aren’t really my thing.” Ketchup was about all the acidity I could take. Vinegar and dishes made with it were just too much for me. This yakisoba-like food had a strong lemon flavor, kind of like tom yum soup. I was still able to finish it, since it wasn’t a huge dish. No point in wasting it.

“I loved it all,” Mimi declared.

“The noodles weren’t really to my taste, but the food was still pretty good. Maybe I’ll try a few more things.”

“I want something sweet!”

I bought another meat skewer, while Mimi found herself a crêpe. We sat down again and resumed the feast.

I noticed the place was set up with designated trash bins for the food packaging. I learned later that the trash was collected underground, and would be automatically sorted, crushed, and recycled. Another waste of tech? I’d say not. There were limited resources in outer space, so this technology must have been born of necessity.

These binge-eating tours with Mimi were a common occurrence. Our goal was to sniff out the most famous foods on every colony we visited and eat them together. Mimi’s ambition was to sample all the foods in the galaxy, so this was a clear step toward her gluttonous dream.

“Are you enjoying your new life, Mimi?” I asked.

“Yes, I love it. We travel all over the galaxy, see new sights, and eat all kinds of delicious food together. It’s wonderful.”

“Really? Good to hear it.”

“Oh and also…I’m actually looking for my grandma.”

“Your grandmother?” That word surprised me.

“Yes.”

Mimi’s grandmother, huh? Come to think of it, I’ve never really asked about her family. I haven’t asked Elma about hers, either.

“What do you mean by ‘looking’ for her?” I asked. “Wasn’t she one of the people on your colony? You told me your parents died in an accident and left you with no close relatives.”

Mimi’s parents had died in the colony, and she had lost her formal rights as a colonist due to damages she couldn’t pay back. The colony had abandoned her. It was then that I happened to meet her and saved her life. If she’d had an adult relative to rely on, surely that wouldn’t have happened to her.

“No, my grandmother wasn’t one of the colonists. I only met her once when I was little, but she was so young then that it was hard to imagine she was my father’s mother. My parents never told me much about her.”

“And since she didn’t show up after your parents passed, you had no way of getting in contact with her,” I surmised. “Not a colonist, huh? Is she a traveling merchant or something?”

“Hmm, I wonder… Now that I think about it, she was kind of similar to Elma.”

“So you think she’s a mercenary? Your grandmother must be at least fifty, right? If she’s that young…really, it’s possible in this universe.”

“Yes, very possible,” Mimi agreed.

The technological progress of this universe was insane. They had adaptable life-support systems, so there were likely plenty of ways to prolong human life, preserve youthful appearances, or even maintain the body’s prime state for a long period of time.

There were even androids who looked indistinguishable from humans, so maybe it was possible to make an entire cybernetic body for one’s brain. I had plenty of money, so it was totally possible I could rely on such technology someday.

“That must mean she’s rich,” I noted.

“I think so, too. Bionics and cybernetics cost a fortune, after all. It piqued my interest, so I did some research. I do think she’s a mercenary. Otherwise, being a noble would be the only realistic way of getting such bionics.”

I had also done a little research on a whim, but I could confirm that outfitting yourself with high-tech bionics and cybernetics to preserve your body’s prime would cost a fortune. Of course, it wasn’t as expensive as a mercenary ship, but a commoner couldn’t afford it. I’d say it cost about three million Ener at minimum.

“Makes sense. But if your grandma is nobility, then it would be pretty strange for your parents to be regular colonists. Same if she’s a wealthy merchant. By process of elimination, she’s gotta be a merc.”

“Right, so I’m searching for someone who fits that description. I’ve been asking mercenary guilds and using my imperial ID to trace my family tree, but I haven’t found any leads yet.”

“Wow, now you’ve got me intrigued. I’m not exactly in a rush to reach my goal, and Elma doesn’t seem to be in a hurry, either. If you find anything out, we can absolutely go track her down.”

“Are you sure?” Mimi asked.

“Absolutely. I’d like to meet her, too. Just be careful not to give her the wrong idea and get me in hot water. She might think I bought you or abducted you!”

“Ah ha ha, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that… I-I hope.” Mimi’s lack of confidence worried me.

Will we have to worry about that? If she really is a mercenary, I’m afraid that she’ll whip out her laser gun and start shooting the moment she sees me.

***

After wolfing down all the street food, Mimi shared some memories of her parents and grandmother as we toured Vlad Prime’s foodie hotspots. We went to a place where we could eat the weird live food that Space Dwergr had sent us as an apology, artificial and cultured meat, and even a high-class bistro where we ate real meat. Dwarven cuisine was surprisingly profound.

However, we did decide along the way to never eat live food again.

It was traumatic. It felt like we had parasites in us. I mean, just imagine eating a soft creature the size of a spiny lobster head-first as it wriggles around. I had Mimi take a video, and it looked like something from a sci-fi horror movie. If I had to say, I guess it tasted good…but the psychic damage done to me was irreversible.

After we finished sampling everything, we headed back to the ship and discussed interior design for the mothership’s furnishings. Mimi and I included Elma and Mei in the conversation, of course.

We were already planning to spend most of our time on the *Krishna*, so we'd figured we could ignore furniture at first. But we might have to bring guests aboard, and it would be nice to have a place to stay while the *Krishna* was unavailable due to maintenance or something. So after thinking about it, we decided to get some stuff for the mothership. It ended up costing a pretty penny, but soon after we sent over the proposed the changes to Space Dwergr, they responded with a counteroffer in the form of a request from the mercenary guild.

After receiving the request, we had a morning meeting with Sara from our swanky hotel room. The expensive room was outfitted with a large holo-display with communication features. Being able to take business meetings without even leaving our room was convenient indeed.

"Test pilot, huh?"

"Yes!" Sara answered. "It seems you're an excellent pilot, so we'd like you to test one of our prototypes and provide us with data and, of course, your thoughts. This is a rare opportunity for us."

"I get that it's a rare opportunity and all, but is a single test pilot actually worth a million and a half Ener?"

"It's pretty high, given a gold-rank mercenary's daily retainer is about eighty thousand," Elma agreed.

This contract offered to write off the cost of the furniture upgrades in exchange for my services as a test pilot for five days. I appreciated it, but it almost seemed too good to be true.

"Consider it an expression of our goodwill after the trouble we put you through," Sara said. "It also includes a confidentiality fee for keeping the new technology that you'll use under wraps, so it's not the most unbelievable amount."

"I see," Mimi agreed. "Including a hush fee does make it sound right." *Does it actually bring the price that high? I guess their apology for the trouble is a big part of the sum, too.*

"Okay, we understand the offer now," I said, moving the conversation along. "Can you tell us exactly what I'll be doing?"

“Yes. You see…” To summarize, I would operate a few prototype ships that utilized experimental technology. They would take data from these test flights, and I would offer my opinions on how it handled. She claimed that they could assure my safety, but I did want to understand the risks.

“Not that there’s much you can do if it just blows up out of nowhere,” I mused.

“Our ships are valued for their safety and reliability, so you can trust us in that regard.” Sara’s confident smile was even wider on the big display. Still, I was weary of dropping my guard around dwarven engineers after everything I’d seen here. *I also heard Wiska made some crazy thrusters…?*

“I sure hope so. So, what do I need to do to prepare, and where should I go?”

***

About an hour later, stuffed into an uncomfortably tight pilot suit, I headed to the prototype hangar and received a lecture from the engineers on the ships I would soon pilot.

“When this ship is completed, it should be the fastest mothership in Space Dwergr’s fleet,” one engineer explained. “On top of our usual sturdiness and reliability, it’s *meant* to have feather-like mobility.”

“What was that? It’s ‘meant’ to?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Our earlier test pilot couldn’t draw out its full capabilities. Based on our calculated specs, he didn’t even reach fifty percent.”

“Fifty percent?” That was a pretty stunning number. If they couldn’t use half of its spec as designed, then either the pilot was unskilled, there was something wrong with the ship’s settings, or their calculations were off altogether. Or I guess the controls might just be too complex. “Well, I guess I’ll just try it and find out.”

“Please do that.”

The engineers handed me a helmet with a HUD installed, and I headed onto the floor to find today's prototype ship. Mimi and Elma had arrived before me. They were wearing body-hugging pilot suits, too. These suits could trace the vitals and slightest motions of the wearer. They must have given them to us so they could collect more data while we piloted.

"Whoa, awesome," I gasped.

"Awesome is a word for it," Elma agreed.

"Th-this is embarrassing…" Mimi was blushing and hiding her chest with both hands. The tight suit was clearly accentuating Mimi's bountiful bosom. The dwarven researchers—mainly the men—were sneaking glances, eyes drawn like magnets to the overwhelming sight. *Eyes off! She's mine.*

"L-let's hurry up and board!" Mimi hustled us up the ladder and onto the ship.

"Yeah, yeah."

This was a prototype, so the inside was bare bones. Obviously, there were no daily necessities you'd normally store on a ship.

"If we got into an accident in this thing, we'd be done for," I noted.

"They do have food and water to last a week in the cargo hold, at least," Elma said. "A prototype ship will have a strong beacon, too, so we don't have to worry."

Fair. If we were carrying out tests close to the colony, then they could send someone out to help in no time.

"Okay, let's begin preflight checks," I announced. "Careful, though; I'm sure it'll be different from the *Krishna* in a lot of ways."

"Of course."

"Yes, sir!"

I donned my helmet and began getting to know the ship. I checked pilot controls, Elma checked operations, and Mimi checked radar and communications.

"It really can't hold a candle to the *Krishna*'s power, huh?" Elma muttered.

“That’s because the *Krishna*’s generator is one of a kind. Even the engineers at Space Dwergr can’t analyze it.”

The *Krishna*’s unique generator was the key to its agility, powerful shields, heavy cruiser-tier firepower featuring four heavy lasers, and more. Despite being compact enough to fit on a small craft, it had output equal to that of a heavy cruiser’s generator. When I first obtained the *Krishna* in *Stella Online*, I did a triple-take when I saw its generator’s insane output.

As for Space Dwergr’s attempt to analyze it, I told them they were under *no* circumstances to dismantle the generator, so I hoped they wouldn’t do anything too crazy. I was a little worried, but if I refused to rely on professionals, then I would have to perform maintenance myself. I didn’t want to try that, so leaving it to them was the only option. Once Tina and Wiska proved themselves trustworthy, I wouldn’t have to worry anymore.

“No problems with radar or connectivity,” Mimi announced.

“Good. Let’s start this test, then. All you, Mimi.”

“Yes, sir!” Mimi connected with the hangar’s control deck and sent a docking request. Next, we would just have to follow their directions out of the colony. Except…

“How is it?” Elma asked.

“Kinda dull,” I noted. “Its reactions all feel delayed.”

“That’s because Space Dwergr’s ships are heavy and have thick plating. It makes them much sturdier, but it’s not a good fit for people like us who prefer mobility.”

I adjusted to the controls quickly, but as soon as we left the hangar and lifted off, I accidentally made the ship rock. The handling was so dull!

When the ship moves more than you mean to move it, you can use thrusters to counteract the motion and balance it. But when you don’t know the right amount of thrust to use or how long to do it, the ship starts to lurch.

“Are they positive the auto-balancer’s gyro is working?” I asked. “I thought these ships were supposed to counterbalance automatically.”

“I think the issue is software, not hardware,” Elma replied. “Maybe we should’ve brought Mei to help out with this.”

Mei had gone to an Oriental Industries branch office on Vlad Prime for maintenance this morning. She was a pro at dealing with software issues like this, so we might've been able to troubleshoot it easily if she were here.

"I guess Space Dwergr hasn't made a high-speed mothership before, huh?" I mused. "Maybe their software development is lagging behind."

Dwarves seemed like they favored hardware anyway. Or what if they had already developed software, but it turned out they were using a generic one for this ship instead? No way—that would be too stupid a mistake, right?

"The gate is open," Mimi announced.

"Okay, time to go." We entered space through the gate used for prototype ships. On the way to the testing area, I decided to first master the ship's movement. "Mm, yeah. It's just a beat too slow," I grumbled.

"Yeah…" Elma seemed almost annoyed.

This prototype's speed was the brute-force kind, where you overcame the weight of the ship by using high-output thrusters to zoom all over the place. But due to its mass, inertia worked heavily on it, making it hard to perform precise movements.

The attitude-control thrusters were strong as well, so with a skilled hand, you could do some crazy stuff. Even the ships that tend to skid the most due to inertia can be pretty nimble as long as you can change direction quickly. As for it being a beat behind, that just meant I needed to be a beat ahead of the game.

Thanks to the high-powered thrusters, the ship moved pretty darn fast in a straight line. Inertia would sling you right into a crash if you misjudged distance or angle, however, so this ship would be difficult to use in an asteroid belt. Fine movements were definitely not the strength in this ship.

On the other hand, if you were to fight in open space with few obstacles, you could skid at high speeds and batter a target with attacks. It might not work well in all-out brawls, but it would have an advantage in one-on-one fights. With its high charging speed and thick plating, a hit-and-run strategy with high firepower could be fun.

"It's quite different from the *Krishna*, isn't it?" Mimi said.

“High-speed heavy ships tend to be a little quirky,” I replied.

“But you’re still piloting it without issue.”

“Yeah, this one isn’t too bad. It’s easy compared to Elma’s old *Swan*.”

“The *Swan*’s a good ship, okay?”

“A good self-destructing space coffin, maybe. But a good ship? Eh…” That ship was even lighter than it looked, and its thrusters were insanely strong to boot. It was like riding a wild mustang. Compared to that, this heavy, plodding ship was far easier to handle.

By the time I had gotten accustomed to the ship’s handling, there was a call from the control deck. “This is admin. *Hammer Seven*, can you hear me?” Naturally, *Hammer Seven* was the name of this ship.

“Yes, *Hammer Seven* here,” Mimi responded. “Getting you loud and clear.”

“We’re ready to begin the target examination. Please head to this point and stand by.”

“*Hammer Seven*, understood. Marking the objective now. Master Hiro?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I followed the instructions displayed on my HUD and started to move the prototype. *It’s been a long time since I last handled a ship that wasn’t the* Krishna*. Time to have some fun.*

***

The first day of prototype testing went by quickly, with only a few issues.

I didn’t have much to say about the *Hammer Seven* prototype’s weaponry. It had four fixed hardpoints where weapons could be installed, which was appropriate for a small battleship. They were all on the top front and center of the ship. I deducted points for leaving the bottom as a blind spot, but I did like how it could cover everything in front and above, both left and right, and focus fire in any of those directions.

In my opinion, good hardpoint placement depended on whether or not a ship could focus fire anywhere but directly in front.

For example, a ship with hardpoints on the top, bottom, left, and right would only be able to focus three of its weapons simultaneously in any direction other than directly forward. If firing on any object not directly in front of the ship, one side's weapon was essentially useless. A ship like the *Hammer Seven* that could focus all its weapons' fire on any enemy above or in front of it was preferable to that, in my opinion.

Some people might prefer reducing blind spots over focusing their fire, sure. You can't use focus fire to its full potential unless you have the skill to keep all your weapons aligned.

Like I mentioned earlier, however, there were a few issues. I listened to the clamoring of the dwarves.

"The ship met its design specs, after all!"

"There's nothing wrong with the software! Your weight and propulsion balance calculations must be off, creating that lag! It's right here in the data!"

"The calculations aren't wrong! The pilot just used his experience to make up for the software's shortcomings!"

"The software is perfect! The pilot obviously used experience to make up for the lag caused by imbalance between the mass and propulsion! The data proves it!"

I achieved a rare high score on the test, though I had expected as much myself. Even if it responded slowly, I just had to act faster to make up for it. And once you get used to a heavy, skidding ship, you can do some pretty cool maneuvers. It wasn't a problem for me.

After the test, I told them that the ship had a slow response and that I made up for it with skill. I told them I didn't know if it was a software or hardware problem, but it was something they should probably fix.

And that's how we arrived at the uproar before us now. The hardware engineers and software engineers didn't seem to get along; they were bickering like cats and dogs. It wasn't my job to mediate this. All I had to do was pilot the ships and give them my assessment.

“Anyway,” I began, “I have no complaints with its turning speed. It still lags behind, but its turning and rolling were fast enough. It’s impossible to make precise movements given the ship’s mass, though. To use it well, I think a pilot would have to use its top speed and heavy plating for a hit-and-run strategy, or to skid like I did to keep the enemy within range of attacks. Since the hardpoints are located on top, the ship will probably be favored by experts.” I continued to give my impressions to the one dwarf standing outside the software-hardware tussle. *I just can’t deal with these loons.*

“Hmm. For future reference, can you tell me what, in a mercenary’s view, makes a ship easy to control?”

“Of course. These are just my own thoughts, but…first, a ship needs to do exactly what it’s told. So basically, it needs to be responsive. Though that might be obvious.”

“Right. Ease of handling is important.”

“Next, you want a ship that’s good defensively. Specifically, most mercenaries prefer strong shields over strong plating. Thick plating is welcome, sure, but only to the extent that it doesn’t affect ship handling. Besides, a mercenary doesn’t want attacks to get to the ship’s plating, because that means spending money on repairs. Shields don’t cost money to maintain. Ship plating is the last line of defense, but I think most mercenaries would sooner run for it than see their shields broken through. Not many of us keep fighting when our plating is taking direct fire.”

I went on to explain that plating upgrades were often far more expensive than shield upgrades. On top of not being able to afford strong plating without a good chunk of change, it also bled money every time you used it, so mercenaries would probably avoid that.

“Hmm, I see.”

“In terms of firepower, you’ll need at least two Class-II weapons on it to match a small battleship. Adding a Class-III might make it pretty popular. Class-I weapons are too weak, so having one Class-II is better in a merc’s eyes than having two Class-I weapons.”

Basically, Class-I weapons were small cannons, Class-II medium ones, and Class-III large.

Speaking of which, the *Krishna*'s four heavy lasers and two flak cannons were all treated as Class-III weapons. Despite it being a small battleship, its six Class-III weapons *and* anti-ship torpedoes meant it was equal in firepower to a heavy cruiser. Most small craft would be lucky to have a single Class-III weapon.

"We'll take that into consideration." The dwarf engineer took down some notes on his tablet, bowed slightly in gratitude, and turned to jump into the scuffle. It seemed he was going to settle this. *Good luck, little guy.*

"You done?" Elma called out as I walked away from the engineers. It seemed the girls had already finished their reports.

"Yeah. You two finished fast, huh?"

"Yes. There were no issues with the radar or communications, and Elma encountered no problems, either."

"I figure that's to be expected from Space Dwergr," Elma said with a shrug. "I did have to complain about the state of the ship in general, though. Without a freak like you at the helm, piloting that ship is out of the question."

"I don't think my piloting is as weird as you say it is…"

To be fair, there's a trick to moving in 3D space using inertia. It's all about practice. First, you have to turn off the auto-balancer and gyro sensor. Then you just vomit a few times until you get used to it. I had gotten a sense of it through my screen when this was all still a game, so I got away with just a bit of motion sickness, but doing it in real life really puts you through hell.

"So, what do we do about this?" I asked. The chaos from before had died down, but the engineers were in a grim mood. One tired-looking dwarf dragged himself out of the gaggle of them—the one I had been talking to earlier.

"We're gonna be adjusting the ship for the rest of the day, so your job here is done for now," he said. "I think we'll have you piloting a different ship tomorrow."

"Cool. Guess that leaves us with some free time."

Mimi and Elma nodded in agreement, so we stripped out of our pilot suits and changed back into our normal clothes before leaving the prototype dock.

***

The next day, we headed to a different prototype dock, where Tina and Wiska were among the engineers. When they saw us, they stopped their work and ran over.

"We've been waitin' for ya, hon!"

"Hey…hon."

"Oh, hey."

I could feel hot jealousy emanating from the other dwarven engineers, who clearly hated seeing how close I was with the girls. Even more terrifying was that a few of them looked ready to cry out of frustration. Some of them pretended to be working, but I could tell.

"We're here for work today," I warned them. "You girls get back to work, too."

"Okaaay."

"We'll see you later."

I sighed as the two obediently returned to their tasks. The pressure from the engineers was off as well. *I guess the two are popular here after all. They're fine now, but will the team be fine after they join our crew? Not that it matters that much to me.*

"The men aren't gonna like you after that one," Elma said with a wry grin.

"It ain't my fault!" I protested.

"Ain't, huh?"

It really wasn't my fault. If I had to say, it was fate's fault. I hate to get all mystical, but it really felt like fate had some hand in this. During our unproductive exchange, a female dwarf walked over with tablet terminal in

hand. She wore a work jumpsuit like Tina and the others; it must have been the uniform.

"Hello there," she greeted us. "We've almost finished setting up, so you won't have to wait long."

"Gotcha. This ship's concept seems pretty similar to the *Hammer Seven*, huh? Though it looks like its form emphasizes speed." The *Hammer Seven* from yesterday had visibly sturdy armor, making it look like a small, heavy battleship. Today's prototype was sharp and streamlined in comparison. The thrusters were a shape I had never seen before, too. Maybe they were some new innovation?

"Yeah, pretty much!" she replied. "We're trying for a small, high-speed battleship, so you're right. Ours is the most speed-optimized out of all of them."

"Interesting…but the weapons look a little pitiful." As far as I could see, it only had one Class-II weapon and two Class-I weapons. "I think it would be more useful if you just had two Class-II weapons instead."

"A mercenary would think so, huh? The problem is the generator isn't quite up to the task. A Class-II laser cannon and two Class-I multi-cannons are already cutting it close."

"That's rough. I'd guess that it's less useful for solo mercenaries and better for ones who act in teams."

"Right," Elma chimed in. "A scout-slash-support battleship, maybe. The ammo limit would give you even less cushion, but I'd like to see it with seeker missile pods instead of multi-cannons."

"Same." Instead of half-assing it with multi-cannons, giving it a high-speed missile carrier would be better. "If you changed the Class-II laser cannon to a Class-II seeker missile pod and used the leftover generator output for higher electronic warfare capabilities, I think it would make the ship's role clearer."

"I see… User opinions are certainly valued. I'll bring up the possibility of using it as a high-speed missile ship."

After our chat, we boarded today's prototype ship, the *Pickaxe 13*, and made our way to the testing grounds.

“Do you think I should bring up this really obvious button?” I asked.

“Eh…” Elma hesitated. “Maybe we should just ignore it.”

“When I see that, I can’t help but want to press it,” Mimi said.

A certain red button next to the main pilot seat’s controls stood out like a beacon. It was encased in a clear cover, so you couldn’t press it by accident. The words “LIMITER CUT” were printed on it in clear letters. I was *extremely* hesitant to press it.

“Why did they make this button so flashy? It’s not gonna explode or something, is it?”

“It’s okay!” Wiska said over comms. “It only makes it so you can utilize the ship’s full capabilities.”

“I mean, true, but…” Tina paused. “Hon, you don’t wanna press that button. Every test pilot who’s pressed it ended up vomiting so much they started spewing blood. Do *not*.”

“Instead of telling me not to press it, why don’t you just remove it?!”

“But I’m sure you can use it correctly!” Mimi protested.

“Even I’m not interested in going fast enough to actually harm myself. I mean, Mimi, you’re way more likely to start vomiting blood than I am.”

“It’ll be okay!” Wiska reassured me. “I adjusted the inertial control, so it’s pretty safe!”

“Is it, though?”

I decided to forget about the red button for now. Instead of dwelling on the blood-spewing, I went through the normal flight test, shooting test, and then battle maneuver test.

“No weirdness here,” I decided. “This ship reacts just how I like.”

“Once they make up for its low firepower with seeker missiles, I think it’ll be a good ship,” Elma added.

“Is its maneuverability equal to the *Krishna*’s?” Mimi pondered.

“It’s close in a lot of ways. For a light, high-speed ship, I give it a passing score.” That said, it couldn’t keep up with the *Krishna* in terms of

firepower, shield output, and plating. With all this agility, it really would do well as a torpedo boat with seeker missile pods and reactive missiles on board.

"Hey, hey!" Wiska piped up. "Try the Limiter Cut before you finish, please!"

"Uhhh…I'm not really interested. I mean, the ship is good enough as is. Do you really need that?"

"But I think it'll be super powerful if you use the burst of speed provided by the Limiter Cut feature! It's incredibly useful for fleeing during reconnaissance or for counterattacks!"

"Maybe so, but still…I've never heard of someone having a good time on a ship with that feature." I snuck a glance at Elma in the co-pilot's seat. She looked back at me morosely. I was mainly referring to her, after all.

"It's okay! I really fixed the inertial control! It's all totally safe!"

"You're really insistent about this," I said, growing more worried.

"With your skills, I'm positive you could use the Limiter Cut to its full potential! Please!" If Wiska cared that much, then I couldn't help feeling a little curious myself. In all honesty, I did kind of want to try it. Just how much would it increase the ship's mobility?

"If you really want it so bad, I guess I'll try. Set up those dummy targets again."

"Woohoo! Okay!" Wiska cheered down the comms line.

"Are you sure about this?" Elma asked.

"If the engineer says it's safe, I gotta trust her. But there's gonna be some turbulence, so get ready."

"Okay!" Mimi chirped in anticipation as I reached for the Limiter Cut button.

I opened up the case.

"Here we…go?!"

The moment I pressed the button, the main thrusters activated and the ship exploded forward, pressing me back into my seat. The speed displayed

was 1.7 times higher than our top speed from before. It had *instantly* accelerated to that just from the press of the button.

"What the heeeeeell?!"

"It's too fast!"

"Eeeeeeeeek!"

This was more than just a wild mustang. The propulsion balance was all off. It felt like a cruiser ship! But would I sit idly by while this ship tossed me around? No! I was gonna tame it!

"Aaaaaargh!" I disabled the auto-balancer and used the attitude-control thrusters to flip a 180 and turn back to the first target I had sailed by. *I'm pulling out all the stops, including my attitude-control thrusters.*

I held my breath and my perception of time slowed down. In slow-motion, I carefully operated the thrusters and weapons to break the first target. The next one was at nine o'clock, so I used the starboard side thrusters to close in before using attitude control again to face it. I fired, and the target blew apart. Mimi's screams behind me sounded strangely drawn out. Elma must have been gritting her teeth and bearing it.

I used the side thrusters and attitude-control thrusters to close in on the third and fourth targets. Both exploded into pieces. Since the distance between targets was small, I didn't need to use the main thruster to approach.

From afar, it would probably look like the ship was bouncing left and right using its side thrusters; combined with the spinning, it was surely a strange sight. The sheer impact each time I fired the side thrusters was tough to withstand; we really were going beyond what the inertial control could handle. *They should put add something to the seats to keep you attached, so nobody goes flying.*

"Haah!" Just as I smashed the eighth and final target, I had to breathe. Time sped back up to its usual rate and, with my loss of control the *Pickaxe 13* started spinning at an insane speed. Dazed from the lack of oxygen, I somehow managed to re-enable the auto-balancer and end the Limiter Cut. Before long, the *Pickaxe 13* came to a standstill.

"Blegh… H-how are you so calm?" Elma asked.

“It’s bad for me, too… Mimi, you okay?”

“Nngh…” Her mind was hazy from being tossed around. *Mimi’s in even more danger than Elma, huh?*

“Mimi? Are you okay, Mimi?” I stood up and rushed over to the operator’s chair where Mimi sat. I messed with the fitting switch on her suit’s collar and loosened it up. Elma eased hers open as well, taking big gulps of air. She would be fine; she was just trained more effectively.

“I-I don’t feel too good…” Mimi groaned.

“Here, I’ll take you to the rest area. Just hang on, okay? Elma, you all right over there?”

“I’m fine… I can at least manage a run to the bathroom if I need to hurl.”

“That’s good to hear.” I scooped Mimi up in my arms and struggled through the narrow hallway to the bare rest space in the back of the ship. There, I laid her on the hard bench. Even for a prototype, these furnishings were crappy.

“You okay there, hon?” I heard Tina’s voice through the internal speakers of my helmet. She must have been worried because we had stopped.

“I’m fine, but Mimi’s in a bad state. Elma’s not doing too hot, either.”

“Our medical staff can take care of ya. We’ll remote control the ship back, too.”

“Understood.” After hanging up, I called Elma up front and explained the situation. “Elma, we’re returning via remote control. I’ll stay here with Mimi.” I figured she would be fine, and I needed to keep an eye on Mimi for now. She could potentially suffocate if she vomited while so groggy.

“You got it, Boss.”

***

As soon as we returned the *Pickaxe 13*, Wiska threw herself down before us in apology with such force that she slid.

“I’m so sorry!”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I told her. “Elma and Mimi only got hurt because of my own piloting style, anyway.”

“Yeah… I don’t think we would’ve been put through that much if you flew like a normal person.”

The dwarven medical team hauled Mimi off on a stretcher. They apparently had an infirmary with a medical team in case anyone was injured during work, so they brought her there. Her physical injuries seemed minor, though. *Maybe we should help her get a little stronger.*

“But I was the one who told you it was safe…” Wiska complained.

“It *would’ve* been safe if I’d driven normally. You don’t have to feel bad; I went outside of the normal scope of expectations, that’s all.” I grabbed Wiska’s arm and pulled her up. My wild piloting was what hurt Mimi and Elma, so it was more accurate to say I was to blame. I just couldn’t live with myself if I made her feel too guilty.

“I mean, his driving *was* kinda insane…” Tina agreed, tapping on her tablet. The other staff gathered around and shared their thoughts.

“No matter how many times we replay the footage, it just doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t look like a real ship’s movements. How do you move sideways, spin around, and still shoot and hit things?”

“There’s just nothing to compare it to,” Elma told them. “All I can say is, it’s crazy driving.”

All I did was use the ship to its fullest to break the targets my way, I thought. I stayed silent, though—I knew her label would stick no matter what.

“Anyway, that’s today’s assignment done, right?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Tina answered. “We got some spicy data.”

“That Limiter Cut sure is incredible, though.”

“Nobody could do that but you, hon. I reckon we need to keep the limiter *un*cut.”

I shrugged. “I think it would be good for short periods of hit-and-run fighting, as long as you only go straight with it. Just depends on the cost.”

This wasn’t a situation where you could just use high-performance parts and call it done. The thruster performance on this ship was clearly great, but it all that power without a way to safely harness it might be waste. Frankly, they were too much for now; it was hard for even me to use them well.

“Anyway, we’ve got good data. Thank you.”

“No prob.” I answered the female dwarf, who was apparently the team leader, and decided it was time to call it a day. We picked up Mimi from the infirmary and headed back to the hotel.

***

Three days after we tried out the dead ball sisters’ prototype ship, I had finished my test pilot work. We then resumed our life of leisure. Maybe that’s exaggerating; after all, we were pretty busy sightseeing around the colony.

We didn’t do much in those last three days of testing. We just cruised around in Space Dwergr’s next generation of high-speed battleship prototypes, and Mimi and Elma found no particular issues in their respective fields on any ship. There were times I grew a bit pale thanks to the weak inertial control in some of the cockpits, but that was it. And I was used to it by that point, so managed to keep up my poker face.

“Say, hon, I’m mighty bored.”

“S-Sis, cut it out.”

Tina lay on the couch with her head in my lap and flirted up at me. Wiska, watching in discomfort, had scolded her multiple times. I didn’t mind flirting with a girl like Tina, but maybe she was being a little *too* forward…

“Ow!” Tina groaned as I pinched her little nose. *Ha ha ha! That really puts your adorable face to waste.*

“She flirts so naturally. A formidable foe, indeed.”

“Yeah, she’s not bad.”

Mimi and Elma, sitting at the table, looked as though they had just encountered a strong enemy. Even so, Tina was unfazed and kept up the brazen advances. Wiska maintained her ladylike distance, but Tina seemed more like a pet than a member of the opposite sex.

“So, uh…” I cast around for another topic. “Five days left until the mothership is done, huh?”

“Yes,” Mei answered, standing next to the couch. “According to their timeline it will be finished in around one hundred and twenty hours. Work seems to be progressing smoothly, so I believe it will be done on time.”

“The *Krishna* should be done soon, right?”

“Yes. It’s slightly behind schedule, but it should be finished within the day. I’ve received word that they will still need to reload our cargo, so they’ll be ready to hand it over tomorrow.”

“I see.” It seemed today would be our last day at the hotel, then. “Are you two about ready?”

“Heh, abso-freakin’-lutely. I ordered everything I need, so once the mothership is furnished and we get all our stuff aboard, we’re good ’n’ ready.” Tina said smugly, her nose still pinched between my fingers. I looked to Wiska, who nodded in response. They were probably fine. Hopefully.

“Gotcha. Hmm…” I pondered. “How about we hit up one of those fancy restaurants Tina mentioned before?”

As soon as the words left my mouth, Mimi and Elma jumped up from the table. *Calm down! Of course you can come, Mimi, so just sit down. And that goes for you too, Elma. I remember how excited you were about all the different liquor they have here.*

That night, Tina brought us to a classy restaurant called The Chicken Joint, where we enjoyed some fancy roast chicken.

I know what you’re going to say. We go to an expensive restaurant called The Chicken Joint, and it just turns out to be…a chicken joint. They cooked chicken farmed two galaxies over. The entrées weren’t quite as

expensive as the Kobe beef I once found, but they were still a good chunk of change. I mean, really— fifteen Ener for a chicken and scallion skewer? That's highway robbery! Imagine spending 1,500 Japanese yen on something like that. Those chickens better be gold-encrusted.

Mimi was amazed by the taste of real roast chicken, and Elma was satisfied with the drink menu. The twins tucked into the chicken as well, cursing their inability to drink and watching Elma in irritation. Their prohibition wasn't over quite yet.

"You seem unmoved, Master," Mei noted.

"Yeah, well…" To me, it was just chicken. I would've cried tears of joy if they had some carbonated soda, but alas, this joint only carried liquor, water, and weirdly expensive 100 percent fruit juice. A hundred Ener a glass? To hell with that! I'll take the three-Ener water.

Thus, our last night at the hotel concluded.

Chapter 6:
Outlaws

THE DAY AFTER we savored our real roast chicken, we heard that the *Krishna*'s maintenance and reloading were complete. We checked out of the hotel and headed to the hangar where the *Krishna* awaited us.

"Here's our home sweet home. Or ship sweet ship, I guess."

"It may be a ship, but the *Krishna* truly is our home."

"It's just as comfortable as a house." Elma seemed to expect most mercenary battleships should be minimalistic, with little more than cheap furniture.

"What's the point of living on an uncomfortable ship, right?" Mimi and I didn't hold such preconceived notions, so we felt right at home in a clean, convenient, and functional space. I still consider those expenses money well spent.

The hatchet gun that Tina and Mei had designed was awaiting us on the *Krishna*. Maybe taking my overhauled power armor for a test run with it would be a good idea. If there were any jobs that required power armor, I'd love to take one on.

But that was a big *if*. I couldn't imagine there would be many jobs that required power armor in this colony…or were there? Maybe? It was a big colony with a long history. There was a lot of ship traffic, which meant a certain class of people might be around. *Hmm…I dunno if I'd be down for a request like that.*

"Why do you look so bothered all of a sudden?" Mimi asked me.

"Nothing big. I just overhauled my power armor and bought the new weapons, so I was wondering if there might be some work I could take on this colony to test it out."

"Oh, yeah," Elma agreed. "I'd bet this colony has some work for you."

“What do you mean?” Mimi furrowed her brow and cocked her head, unsure of what we were implying. She seemed lost.

“Tarmein Prime was a relatively new colony, so they probably had some measures against them,” Elma said. “But a big, old colony like Vlad Prime would have weaker or ineffective countermeasures.”

“Huh?” Mimi was still confused.

“People abandoned by the government,” Elma explained. “Illegal residents, you could call them.”

“Oh…” Mimi’s face clouded over in understanding. The Abandoned were people cut off by their own governments—much like Mimi would have been without my intervention.

On Tarmein Prime, they were allowed to live only under the condition that they stayed within a designated sector, and they received almost no protection from the government. By “allowed to live,” I mean they were given air to breathe and a space in the colony to exist. Nobody cared if they starved to death or died in the streets, or if they were killed in a scuffle with others. The government never cracked down on them, yet also never helped them. They were wholly ignored by legal residents.

They came from many backgrounds: former legal citizens who had fallen in status for some reason, spacefarers left behind by their crews, people who had arrived as stowaways on ships, and more. A colony with such a long history as Vlad Prime might even have families who had been among the Abandoned for generations.

“But what does that have to do with mercenary work?” Mimi asked.

“A common mercenary job is to clear those people out, dead or alive,” I answered.

“What?!” She was stunned. Fair enough; I was essentially telling her that mercenaries go around with power armor and laser weapons and murder downtrodden people.

“It’s not like you would just go around killing people like the ones in Tarmein Prime’s Third Division,” Elma clarified. “When mercenaries do this work, they only deal with the bad seeds—armed gangs and mafias, other people like that.”

“What kind of people?”

“All kinds. There are people who take up weapons and lord over a part of the colony, some who mess with the pipes to screw with oxygen and chemicals, people who leak information to pirates for cash…and in the worst cases, people who abduct colonists to *literally* devour them.”

“W-wow…” Mimi was horrified, as was I. I had heard of armed mafias, but what was this about cannibals?! That did not sound like my idea of a good time.

“…Actually, let’s just rent out a training ground,” I decided. “I don’t wanna tango with anyone like that.”

“Yeah, do that. Fighting people without power armor isn’t for you.”

“Good idea.”

When we arrived at the *Krishna*’s maintenance yard, there was some kind of hubbub.

“What’s going on?” Mimi asked.

“Who knows?” I shrugged. “Let’s go over and ask.”

“It doesn’t seem dangerous, at least.”

When we reached the dock where the *Krishna* should be, we found a crowd of people. I didn’t see any outsiders, though; they were all dwarves in Space Dwergr work jumpsuits. Was there an accident or something?

When I approached, the dwarven engineers saw me and cleared a path. In the center of the crowd was Tina. The jumpsuit she wore was tattered, and there were bruises on her face. This didn’t look good.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded. The engineers glanced at Tina. Just as I realized Wiska was nowhere in sight, Tina walked up to me, head hung in shame.

“We need your help. Please, hon…” Tina pleaded, tears streaming down her face. *This is bad news, no doubt about it.*

I turned to look at Elma, but she only shrugged in silence. I looked at Mimi next. She glanced with great worry at Tina before staring right into my eyes. *Yeah. Figured.*

I thought of looking to Mei for help, too. But she was right behind me, and I didn't want to turn my back to Tina right now. Not that Mei would raise any objection to my decision anyway.

"You have to tell me what happened before I can do anything," I told her. "Let's get those wounds patched up first." I pulled the sobbing Tina into a hug and patted her back. I wasn't so cold a man that I could abandon her at a time like this. Guess I'm actually a big softie, huh?

***

I had Mei take Tina to a medical pod, then got her into the bath. Telling the whole story would be too uncomfortable if she was filthy and bruised. Tina wanted to talk sooner, but I needed to get ready, so I left Mei with her.

"I don't know what's going on, but this is definitely going to be a pain," I sighed.

"Yeah. We already know you're gonna help, though," Elma said with a smirk.

"As long as it's within my power," I answered. I pulled up the contacts list on my terminal.

"Yes? Sara here!" came the slightly tense voice of a young woman. *Yep, that's Sara. Sorry, Sara; we have to go through you to talk to Space Dwergr.*

"Hey, there's trouble," I said. "Bad trouble, at that. Come to the *Krishna*'s maintenance dock with a security official who has enough authority to make big decisions."

"Hmm…? What exactly is going on?"

"When we came to pick up the *Krishna*, Tina begged us for help. She'd been beaten up pretty badly. I still don't know the details, but her

sister isn't with her. Worst case, she might be dead."

"Wha—?!"

"Sounds like a huge pain in the ass, right? Hurry over here before it gets worse."

"Urgh… Bleh, o-okay…" Sara sounded nausated on the other end of the line. *I get that; too much stress makes you wanna vomit. I'll just pretend I didn't hear you retching, good luck.*

"So, have you heard anything?" I asked the deputy factory manager who had come aboard with Tina. The regular factory manager wasn't here due to some leadership training or something.

"She's hasn't said a word. We don't really know anything."

With that, he began explaining what he'd heard. According to him, Tina had arrived about ten minutes before we did, battered and beaten. She was very late to work, and given her bruises, she had clearly been through some trouble. They had asked what happened and where Wiska was, but Tina didn't answer. Maybe she thought I was the only one she could rely on, or that it would just be faster to ask me directly. She wasn't wrong about that, since we arrived only ten minutes later.

While I was listening, Mei and Tina returned. Tina's bruises had disappeared thanks to the medical pod, and her jumpsuit was clean, though still a little torn up. The pod and the washer-dryer combo did good work indeed.

"I'll get to the point," I said. "Who did this, and where is Wiska?"

"It was Kharkov…an old *coworker*."

"You mean one of the gang members from your old home?"

"Yeah. I'd never forget him, with his stupid face and his stupid laugh."

"Got it. And why did this Kharkov guy attack you? What'd he do to Wiska?" I demanded. Tina clenched her fists atop the cafeteria table.

"That bastard heard about the *Pickaxe 13* from someone. He wanted the blueprints, the test data from your flight, and Wis's new thruster blueprints."

“And what does he plan to do with those? Sell them to a rival company?”

“He just might,” the deputy manager answered. “And if he were to sell it alongside your test data, he could lie about its capabilities to sell it for even more. If one ignores the difficulty of their use, Wiska’s thrusters are extremely innovative.”

“Uh-huh. So he wants to exchange her for the data? He’s being pretty sloppy with all this, isn’t he?” It was a mystery where he got his info on the *Pickaxe 13*, but it seemed outright childish to beat up Tina and take Wiska as a hostage for ransom. “And where does he want to make the swap?”

“…The second maintenance district.”

“Of course,” Elma muttered to herself with a sigh. I looked up in annoyance. *Of course, of course. This is gonna be a real pain.* The deputy manager likewise frowned. Mei was as stoic as ever, but she probably knew what this meant better than anyone.

“Erm, what’s going on?” Mimi asked, the only one out of the loop. Yeah, she wouldn’t understand.

“Hint one: Remember what we were discussing before we arrived at the dock? Hint two: Notice the low number assigned to the maintenance district.”

“Oh… Oooh. It’s a really dangerous area, isn’t it…?”

“One of the most dangerous places on Vlad Prime, little lady,” the deputy manager replied. “The place is dominated by people so bad that *outlaw* doesn’t even begin to describe them.”

“B-but Wiska is an employee of Space Dwergr! Surely they wouldn’t just stand by…” As Mimi protested, the buzzer sounded. It seemed the representatives of Space Dwergr had arrived.

***

“The fact of the matter is, it would be difficult for our company to rush to her aid,” said the frowning security official who accompanied Sara.

“B-but why?! Are you just going to abandon Wiska?!” Mimi cried, appalled.

Sara, the deputy factory manager, and the security official were all visibly pained. Tina gritted her teeth and looked straight at the floor. Mei watched her expressionlessly, while Elma flashed Mimi a humorless grin.

“Yeah, I figured as much,” Elma said. “They’re running into a cost-benefit problem here.”

“Cost-benefit?”

“Think how much risk they’d have to take on to save Wiska. Those guys control the maintenance district. If Space Dwergr were to challenge them openly, they might even go so far as to instigate terrorist attacks on the company. It’s too much for them.”

This kind of threat was what prevented local governments from outright removing people like this once they settled in old colonies. The Abandoned weren’t stupid; they would do anything to protect themselves. They dominated an important part of the colony and could effectively take the colony itself hostage in the name of self-preservation.

In newer colonies, districts key to industry and infrastructure were heavily guarded to keep such a thing from happening. They also had a system of backups for important pipelines and facilities in case they were disabled for a long period of time. Older colonies couldn’t do that, so once people set up camp in vulnerable parts of the colony, it was hard to remove them.

“So if Space Dwergr moved in on the second maintenance district to save Wiska, a single person, they could potentially destroy the colony’s support system,” I explained. “Their security personnel would risk injury or death, too. But if they abandon her, they could reduce that risk to nothing and let the whole thing blow over. No damages, and no loss of data. If you weigh the options, abandoning Wiska is the smaller risk by far.”

I looked to the leader of security. “That said, your security personnel couldn’t protect a single person from getting abducted by the Abandoned, of all people. Your department’s reputation is about to go down the toilet, and the company will lose people’s confidence. Who would want to work for an

organization that can't protect them from getting snatched off the street? In fact, maybe that's part of the enemy's plan, too."

The perp was some guy named Kharkov, but he was just an underling; a bigger fish must be pulling the strings. Someone had intercepted the info on Space Dwergr's prototype and sicced him on the girls. If their objective was an attack on Space Dwergr, then this was a perfect situation for them.

If Tina stole the data and handed it over to the mastermind, who might be a member of a rival corporation, that would be a good outcome. If Space Dwergr tried to rescue Wiska, fought the Abandoned, and damaged Vlad Prime as a result, then that would hurt Space Dwergr as well. It would also cause a scandal if Space Dwergr's actions impaired colony operations.

And if they abandoned Wiska? The mastermind could spread that information, too, and destroy Space Dwergr's reputation. They would probably put Wiska to use as well, just to make the smear campaign really sordid. And I do mean "use" in the worst sense of the word.

But the mastermind had made one mistake.

"Not that I give a shit about this idiot's motives," I said dismissively. "So…how much is Space Dwergr willing to pay to save Wiska's life and their own reputation?" I asked, forming a ring with my index finger and thumb.

Indeed, the big fish had missed one thing: I was here. A mercenary who dealt in power and death.

***

TODAY HAD STARTED OFF BUSY and never let up. Our newest member had gotten right to work. I had only seen the girl he brought in briefly, but that work jumpsuit was one of Space Dwergr's. It belonged to a blue-haired young woman, who had been abducted in broad daylight. That newbie was proactive, but he was a damn fool.

"I don't like one bit of this," I said.

“This again? You always think bad stuff’s gonna happen, but it never does.” Billy laughed mockingly. *If you wanna talk about shitty predictions, how about your boat race gambles? You always lose, asshole, and you come crying to me every time.*

“Ah, shut up. Remember how I predicted that last bar would suck—wait, that ain’t my point. I seriously think something bad is gonna happen.” Ever since I saw that blue-haired girl, I had an ominous feeling that just wouldn’t go away. I saw a girl like her in a holo-porn once, I think. That shit was so wild, I remember feeling sick for two whole days after.

“I mean—wait a sec. Someone’s coming over…”

“Say what?!” I whipped around to see what Billy was on about, and was greeted with an incomprehensible sight: one man, wearing combat armor and some sort of high-tech cape, carrying a huge laser. The pretty lady behind him was in maid clothes for some reason, but she had a weapon, too—some kind of gun with a huge blade on it.

They were bad news, no doubt.

“Hey there,” the man with the rifle called. “We’re looking for a young dwarf woman. She’s got blue hair and she’s wearing a jumpsuit from Space Dwergr. You seen her?”

“H-heh heh,” Billy chuckled. “If I know, d’ya think I’d tell you for free?”

“Idiot!” I tried to warn him.

The man whipped out a pistol from God knows where and fired at Billy. The lethal beam struck the maintenance district’s sturdy wall, dying our surroundings a dazzling red for just an instant.

“I’m in a hurry,” the man said. “Maybe you’ll talk after I shoot one of your ears off?”

“The newbie abducted her this morning!” Billy screamed, suddenly obedient.

“That newbie’s Kharkov, right? Tell me where he took her, and I won’t kill you. If you lie or even if you’re wrong, you’re dead. If I can’t find you, I’ll kill anyone I *can* find and tell the others you’re the one to

thank for it. Your life, along with those of the people living here, depends on your honesty."

The man pointed his gun right between Billy's eyes. I didn't know if this crazy asshole was truly ready to kill us all, but if he was, then Billy and I had to get out of here. Even if we somehow survived, everyone else would kill us before long.

"Forgive me!"

"No."

Billy was shaking like a cornered mouse. *Dumbass, pick your battles and just answer him. This guy's not sane, and I'm not about to die for you.*

I prayed this maniac wouldn't turn his weapon on me. Raising both hands high to show I was unarmed, I held my breath. *I am the wall, I am the floor, I am the air. Please don't look at me, please…*

"Mei, mark this location," said the man to his companion.

"Yes, Master."

"I'm planning to go wild here. If you don't wanna get caught up in it, get lost."

"Yessir!" Billy shouted. If he was warning us, maybe he was a good guy at heart. I still wasn't gonna stick around to find out, though. My sixth sense said he would stomp on us like trash to get what he wanted.

After a while, the insane asshole took his rifle and his maid to head deeper into the district.

"Wh-what do we do now?" Billy asked me.

"Let's hang out in the light." *In the light* meant leaving the shadows and going to the districts where normal people lived. No matter what happened here, it wouldn't touch the light.

"Huh? Dude, we can't just leave…"

"Today's gonna be a hell of a day. We gotta keep our heads down." If we stayed here, we'd be in deep shit. I just knew it; my sixth sense told me as much. And if I cared about anything, it was saving my own skin.

◁◎▷

After wrapping up our chat with Space Dwergr, I took Mei with me to the second maintenance district. Fully armed, of course. I didn't use my power armor, though; since the maintenance districts were almost entirely used by dwarves, the ceilings were seriously low. They were barely over two meters high, so it would be hard to maneuver in power armor.

I chose my battle armor and the chameleon thermal mantle I'd picked up, along with a tactical headset, personal shield generator, laser rifle, laser gun, and various grenades and other gadgets.

"It certainly is a mess down here," Mei mused, holding one of my hatchet guns in each hand. Due to the material they were made from, they were extremely heavy. Far too heavy for me to use without my power armor, but Mei could handle them just fine. That was the power of her special alloy fiber artificial muscles.

"That it is. But the people here did their best to build it, I'm sure," I answered as we headed straight for our destination.

Abandoned or not, these were still people. Once people gathered, factions would form, and people would work together toward a shared goal: to improve their lives bit by bit. That was why they took over the maintenance district to protect themselves, and why they tried to make their own humble community, sloppy or not, in the district.

The walls, made from shipping containers, still had the names of unknown companies painted on them, and the LEDs used to light the area varied in brightness and hue. Everything was irregular in this makeshift town. A place of rest for the have-nots.

Mei and I felt eyes on us as we walked through the district, but many just waited with bated breath for us to be on our way.

"I thought things might get a little crazier than this," I said.

"Perhaps our appearances are sufficiently persuasive," Mei replied, holding up the two hatchet guns she wielded. *Yeah, I'd say you're a lot more intimidating than I am, Mei. A posh maid with two bulky, terrifying weapons…now that's a sight to behold.*

"Anyway, you really can tell they're fighting for their lives the best they can."

“Indeed. Methods aside, it is clear they are desperate.”

“Yeah… Not that I have any reason to be especially considerate toward them.”

I had some sympathy for people who had to live hand-to-mouth, sure. But that had nothing to do with this. Regardless of the circumstances, I was here to save Wiska, and I’d kill anyone who stood in my way. I mean, who abducts an innocent young woman in broad daylight? The world would be better off without people like that.

“Over there,” I ordered.

“Yes.”

We arrived at a warehouse deep in the maintenance district. Or a former warehouse, I guess; it couldn’t exactly store any wares after the Abandoned took over. Now it served as a gathering place for the gangs of the district. We ducked behind an old shipping container nearby.

“Let’s start with recon.”

“Yes. I will take care of the controls.”

I pulled a handful of what looked like pachinko balls from my pocket and tossed them on the ground. They rolled normally for a moment before taking on a life of their own and darting into the warehouse.

The large roll-up door that was originally built into the warehouse had long been removed. The place’s walls were in shambles and its doors ill-fitted, so there were plenty of cracks just the right size for a small metal ball. The whole handful of them had infiltrated the warehouse within moments.

“Link us up.”

“Understood.”

The “pachinko balls” were actually automatic reconnaissance drones, controlled by Mei. They broadcast video to my tactical headset.

Wiska was being held hostage. If we charged in head-on, they might use her against us or hurt her. Either way, I planned to take out the people who took her, but her safety was top priority.

“Filthy. They need to clean up in here.”

“Agreed.”

The place was a dump, littered with random pamphlets, snack wrappers, food containers, and other various scraps. Couches so torn the stuffing bulged out kept company with low tables lying at haphazard angles. A dirty bar counter in the back was furnished with crude stools.

“Look deeper.”

The drones searched the warehouse top to bottom, literally—they used magnetism to traverse the metallic ceilings and walls.

“There she is…all the way in the back.”

After a few minutes of through searching, a drone finally located Wiska. They must have stripped of her company jumpsuit, because she was only wearing underwear. Was that to keep her from escaping, or worse? She cowered in the corner of the small room, trembling.

“Dammit!”

“Master, please remain calm. As far as I can see, they’ve done nothing to her except remove her clothing.” Mei’s voice managed to cool my seething rage. *Right; I have to keep my head. Wiska’s life is on the line. I can’t mess this up.*

“No way in, huh?”

“There is a ventilation duct, but we would not be able to pass through.”

“Then let’s just go with Plan A.”

“Yes, please leave it to me. The drones can neutralize their guards.”

By bringing a few recon drones together, Mei could generate enough a strong enough electric shock to knock a person unconscious. One zap was enough to drain their battery and put them out of commission until they could be recharged, but that was a small price to pay to neutralize the guards. We already knew Wiska’s location, after all.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

We leapt out from hiding and took our positions. I stationed myself next to the entrance, while Mei stood right in front of it. Without a word,

she kicked down the door and dodged sideways. I lobbed a flashbang inside.

There was a *boom*, followed by a flash that lit up the whole district for an instant. With all the holes in the walls, the warehouse could hardly contain the light and sound.

“All yours,” I said.

“Leave it to me.”

Mei charged in firing both hatchet guns. I activated my chameleon thermal mantle to ghosted through the doorway behind her.

I held my breath, and everything slowed down again. I slid through panicking humans and dwarves, watching as Mei shot a few jellyfish-like aliens who had been unaffected by the flashbang. I quickly made my way to the back of the warehouse. I had already mapped out my path, thanks to info from the recon drones, and marked any gang members who might block my way. Since we had a drone hovering around each one, I could trace their paths in real time.

It didn't take me long to run into one.

"Haah!" When I exhaled, the world accelerated back to its usual pace.

"Wha?! Who the hell let you into the great Kharkov's—" The guy, a laser gun-wielding dwarf, must have heard the commotion and come to check it out. He was shocked at what he saw. I was hard to make out clearly due to the chameleon mantle, but it was impossible to completely hide the laser rifle.

I squeezed the trigger, and the lethal laser instantly struck the gang member's chest. It burned through clothing and flesh alike, causing explosions that added impact damage to the already-searing heat. Without special-made clothes or combat armor, direct hits from a laser blast were almost always instantly fatal.

"Master, I've secured the main entrance."

"Over here," I said. A bunch of guys who looked like extras from a gang movie appeared from deeper within—dudes with crazy tattoos, mechanical prosthetic arms, stained jackets with spikes and chains, and the like. "Well, they sent the welcome party. Keep doing what you're doing."

"Understood. I will continue with my diversion."

The bad guys screamed, and lasers started to light up the air. I took cover before they could aim them at me.

"Phew. Not interested in a real shootout," I muttered, fishing around in my grenade pouch.

Once I found what I wanted, I flipped the activation switch. I mentally counted to three and hucked it. The grenade bounced off a wall and exploded midair, unleashing an electrical current that surged out three meters in all directions, along with a crackling noise and blinding light.

“Eyaaaah!”

“Gah! My eyes!”

I heard screams from the other side of the old vending machine I was using for cover. Now was my chance.

I held my breath again and leaned out from behind the vending machine, rifle ready. That shock grenade had knocked two of them out and blinded a third, but two were uninjured. I set my sights on the furthest uninjured one and fired. It was a direct headshot; he would probably die instantly. I started raining fire upon the last remaining enemy.

The key to taking on multiple enemies at once is to quickly analyze each one’s threat level and start with the most threatening. Most people would think to start from the closest and go outward, but at times like this, it was safer to start with the ones in the back who were unaffected by the grenade.

“S-stop—!” one screamed.

“Nah.” I shot the blinded gang member, then walked over to the ones my grenade knocked out and finished them off, too. Call me merciless, but I wasn’t planning to get bitten in the ass later for being too nice now.

I tossed the enemy corpses aside and headed for the room where they were holding Wiska. I heard a man’s voice inside.

“Huh?!”

There was a dwarf on the floor with several immobile recon drones around him. Mei must have neutralized him as I approached, just as we had planned.

“Wiska?” I called out.

“Huh…? I-is that you, Captain?!” I heard Wiska’s voice and the pads of her bare feet coming behind the bars blocking off the room, so I revealed myself.

“Back up. I’m breaking these bars.” I pointed my laser rifle at the bars as Wiska put some distance between us. It was a crude cell, probably made from more scrap. It took only seconds to break the lock with my rifle and kicked the door down. “No time to explain. I’m here to save you, so let’s go,” I said before firing off two laser shots into the fallen dwarf’s back. *Sorry, buddy. I’m a bit of a coward.*

“Wh-where’s Sis?” Wiska asked.

“She’s safe and waiting with the *Krishna*.”

I remounted the laser rifle on the back of my armor and held my hand out to Wiska. She hesitated, vulnerable in only her underwear, but then timidly reached out and accepted. I held her close under my mantle with my left arm; since she was barefoot, she would cut herself on the garbage-strewn streets of the district otherwise.

“Target rescue complete,” I informed Mei over comms. “I’m returning to you now.”

“Their resistance has intensified,” she replied. “Take escape route B.”

“Understood.” I whipped a grenade out of my pouch.

“Huh?! That’s—” I didn’t hear the rest of whatever Wiska was about to say. I threw the grenade at the left-hand wall before ducking back into the makeshift prison cell. There was a flash of green light and a gust of hot wind.

“It’s our only option,” I said bluntly.

“But a plasma grenade inside a colony…”

A plasma grenade’s intense heat could evaporate crappy walls—or those of old colonies not made to withstand them—in an instant. Depending on how you used them, they could open up an instant escape route.

Infiltration plan B was to open a wall just like I had, neutralize the guards with Mei’s help, snatch Wiska back, and run like hell. It would have been successful as a rescue, sure, but I’d preferred a plan that let me take revenge on her kidnappers.

There also happens to be a trick to making clean holes in walls. The plasma grenade must explode in midair, like the shock grenade I used

before. If it detonated on the ground, it would melt the floor as well, making it hard to pass through.

"Let's go. Hold on tight."

"O-okay!"

I exited through the brand new hole in the wall and circled the warehouse, looping back toward the front entrance. For my short glimpse on the way out, it looked like the hole I'd made had been someone's bed a few minutes ago—well, too bad for them!

"We'll be back around front soon," I told Mei.

"Understood. I will annihilate them."

Immediately after, red laser light splashed up the walls of the warehouse, accompanied by countless screams. Diversionary work completed, Mei renewed her attack in earnest, killing off all the gang members who had fallen for her plan. No doubt the main entrance was a sea of blood by now.

I ran right past the front door and back through the second maintenance district toward the *Krishna*.

"U-um, what about Mei?" Wiska asked.

"She'll catch up." No sooner had I finished my sentence than Mei appeared next to us. There was no trace of blood on her two hatchet guns. She had either cleaned them, avoided melee combat, or sliced through her adversaries so fast the blood didn't touch the blade. *Okay, even she can't do that, right? Right? I almost feel like she can, and that scares me.*

"Apologies for the wait," Mei said.

"Well done. You hurt at all?"

"Of course not. I would never be so careless with the body you graciously gave me."

"Figures."

Mei's maid uniform was totally normal—no built-in anti-laser capabilities or anything like that. Her skin itself did have such defenses, though, and her artificial flesh and muscles made from special alloy fibers, so she was extremely durable.

Suddenly, Wiska started to fidget in my arms.

“Hey, keep still. You’re making it hard to carry you.”

“Urk… I-I’m sorry.” She shrunk back again, small body tense up against me. *I guess she would feel a little self-conscious now that she’s safer. Not her fault.*

“Master, we’re exiting the district.”

“Where’s our rendezvous?”

“They’re on their way.” Mei led the way, so I followed her a short way from the second maintenance district until we stopped in front of a small, inconspicuous van. It was obviously a vehicle made for dwarves—it looked cramped even from the outside.

I approached the van and rapped on the window twice, thrice, and then twice again. The rear passenger door slid open. I placed Wiska gently inside and covered her with my chameleon thermal mantle. I tossed my laser rifle in after her, since it was a pain to carry. Mei placed the two hatchet guns in the trunk.

“You’re going on to the *Krishna* first. Get out of here!”

“H-hey, wait!” Wiska started to speak, but my priority was securing her safety as quickly as possible. I interrupted her with a rough pat on the head, closed the door, and banged on the window to signal the driver to move out.

“There they go,” Mei said.

“Yep. Now, let’s take a nice walk home.”

We could’ve procured a vehicle for ourselves, but we would have stood out too much. Cars for dwarves were all over the colony, and they were easy to access—especially with Space Dwergr’s help. But once we had Wiska back at the *Krishna*, the enemy wouldn’t be able to touch her. As nice as a ride to the *Krishna* would have been, we wanted to prioritize getting her there safely.

“Well done, Master.”

“You too, Mei,” I replied. “If we think of this as the price of bagging a top-tier mechanic, I’d call that pretty cheap.” I looked to her, my lips curled into a devious grin.

“I do love when you pretend to be evil, Master.”

“It’s not pretend! I’m a real-deal bad dude.” *Cut it out, Mei! Stop looking at me with that patronizing smile! It’s super effective on me.*

I mean, I *had* killed a bunch of people just to save Wiska. Mei had killed even more on my orders. If it was wrong to sacrifice others’ lives for my own goals, then I wasn’t that different from the gangs myself.

“Master, you are too kind.”

“You make some real leaps in logic sometimes, Mei.” I couldn’t bear that she had read my thoughts *and* come to her own (correct) conclusion about my mindset.

“Leaps of logic and inspiration are something that we machine intelligences take pride in.” Mei looked awfully satisfied with herself, but I wasn’t praising her. *Stop that! I mean it!*

Whatever. Either way, I’m just glad Wiska is safe.

Chapter 7:
Tina and Wiska

MEI AND I RETURNED to the *Krishna* without issue—turns out nobody is stupid enough to jump a man wearing combat armor—where we found Wiska and Tina in the middle of a tearful reunion.

"Waaaah! Siiiiis!"

"Wiiis, I'm so glad you're saaafe!"

What beautiful sisterly love…except for the fact that they were both covered in tears and snot. *I'll just pretend I didn't see that.*

"Good work out there," Elma greeted me. "No trouble, right?"

"Mei did most of the work, so it was easy."

"That so?" She looked at me skeptically. I was a little down after taking so many lives, but I doubted she could see that on my face. Did she notice something?

Mimi dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief as she watched the twins hugging and crying. *I'll just leave them to her. Now, let's get down to business…*

"Well done." The person who spoke was a security official of Space Dwergr, someone even higher up than the last one. I guess he had come to the *Krishna* while Mei and I were out kicking ass.

"Meh. This is just what we do."

"I should expect no less from a gold-rank mercenary."

"I usually work on my ship, though. Not very interested in fighting face to face."

I used to be obsessed with first-person shooters, but I had no experience shooting in real life. *Stella Online* had a mode where you fought in first person, so I just used my experience from that. Still, that was only a video game. It was a mystery how I was able to carry myself so well in reality. It's why I was reluctant to fight face to face; I didn't even know how

my *hold my breath to slow down time* thing worked to begin with, and I hated to rely on things that didn't make sense.

"You seem like you'd do well as a sweeper, though."

"Maybe, but I'd never make as much as I do now," I said with a shrug.

Our reward this time was 50,000 Ener. Not pocket change, no, but not the jackpot, either. The request was to rescue Wiska and annihilate her kidnappers. It was an adequate reward for the work, but taking a job without a ship meant less money for putting your life on the line. There wasn't much penalty for death in *SOL* beyond losing your gear, but here, people died for real.

At least it cost a lot less to get your starting gear as a land-based mercenary. Even if you bought the newest and most expensive items, it wasn't as costly as a fully tuned starting zabuton ship.

"You really wouldn't do it?" the official asked me.

"No. I won't endanger myself for 50,000 Ener. Space is full of pirates, and I can spend one day shooting them down and get double that."

"But fighting on your ship is still putting your life in danger, isn't it?" The security official grinned wryly. He was technically right, but I was never going to lose to pirates on my ship. Fighting in the *Krishna* was a hundred times safer.

"Maybe. Either way, the job is done, right?"

"Yes, and we've just received your battle logs. Perfectly executed. The rest depends on what the higher-ups want, but I don't anticipate any problems." He nodded as he tapped his tablet.

It had all happened in a flash, but this problem was laid to rest now. Illegal residents of the colony had abducted an interstellar company's employee, a mercenary took on the request because the company couldn't handle it themselves, and the abductors were annihilated. An insignificant adventure that happened all over the universe every day.

The employee was rescued before her kidnappers could abuse her, and the mercenary received a fair reward. Since the kidnappers were dead, the colony would be slightly more at peace.

“Can we move forward with those two as the company proposed?” I asked.

“Of course. We will officially loan them to you within the day.”

“So the question now is where they’ll sleep tonight. I’m sure we’ll figure it out, though.”

The *Krishna* was only big enough for five people. We could fit more on if we pushed it; Mei was already staying in the cargo room, after all. I could even sleep in the pilot’s seat while the twins slept in my bed until the Skithblathnir was delivered. If necessary, the twins could stay in Mimi’s or Elma’s room, or I could get a hotel until the time came. We had plenty of options.

***

After Sara and the security official left and I confirmed receipt of my reward, Tina and Wiska were finally calm enough to talk.

“We’ll be in your care.”

“We plan to serve you wholeheartedly.”

Wiska, don’t you think “serving me wholeheartedly” is a bit much? For real.

“S-sure,” I stammered. “Relax, though.” They looked way too serious. Yeah I’d saved them and all, but I wasn’t going to use that to take advantage or try to make a move on them or anything. It kinda made me feel bad.

“I understand you two appreciate what Hiro’s done,” Elma chimed in, “but try not to focus on it too much. You’ll just tire him out.”

“Elma’s right,” I said. “I just didn’t like those spineless pieces of human garbage messing with my two future crew members, so I dealt with the problem. That’s all there is to it. It was my own decision, so you don’t have to treat me special.”

“That ain’t right, though! You saved Wis; she only came home safe because of you. She’s more important to me than my own life, so I gotta

return the favor.” Tina looked me right in the eye.

“If you hadn’t come, I would’ve suffered unspeakable things, or even died. You risked your life to save me, and I’m going to pay you back.” Wiska looked up at me, too.

“I don’t have anything worth Wis’s life, so all I can give you is my own,” said Tina.

“I truly think I would be dead now if not for you, so I want to do the same as Sis…”

The two were dead serious. If it had been a joke, I might’ve answered, “Hell yeah, let’s get down to it!” I mean, it sounded like that’s what Tina was offering, right? And Wiska was going right along with it, too. These two sure were a handful.

“Well then, I’m excited to see your work. As *crew members*, that is.” I was on the fence. Very much so. I mean, these two were looking at me like they really meant it. I wasn’t the kind of man who turned down what was freely offered, but these two, at a time like this…?

“I mean, we won’t force ya, but are you that against it? I’m serious as a heart attack.”

“Let me say so there are no misunderstandings: No, I’m not against it. I appreciate it, of course. But you two aren’t thinking straight right now, so you need to clear your heads. Spend a few days relaxing, and if your offer still stands, then I’ll think about it.”

Long ago, Mimi had been cornered by thugs and I’d come to her rescue. She was so grateful I had eventually hardened my resolve and accepted her advances—though it was hard to say that *I* was thinking straight back then.

In Elma’s case, she had misunderstood things, and I had gone with the flow. If I’m being honest, though, my interest in her was also self-interest. I wanted Elma, including her wisdom and experience. Looking back, I might have already fallen for her back then.

But I still hadn’t made up my mind about these two. After all, accepting their offer meant I’d be taking on both sisters, which meant twice

as much responsibility. That made it more difficult for me to say yes without some serious thought. And, well, there was a simpler reason.

"To be perfectly frank, I'm scared of doing it with you two. It feels like…it'll open new doors inside me. Like once I try it, I'll never be able to stop myself again."

The two of them were my age, and they were perceived as fully mature dwarven women, but they looked like teenagers to me. Young teenagers barely out of puberty, in fact. Sure I'd seen porn of that sort back in Japan, but I wasn't totally comfortable doing the deed with girls who looked so young, even if they were fine with it.

"So basically," I said, "I need time to get my thoughts in order. You two are dangerous in a lot of ways."

"And how do ya want me to respond to that?"

"It just means that he's worried for our sake, Sis." Wiska's interpretation was too generous to me.

To put it in more baldly, I was just terrified. *I mean, look at the size difference! Their heads only reach up to my chest!* I couldn't help but worry how their bodies would handle it if we actually did the deed.

"Also," I added, "I really shouldn't make a decision like this on my own. Talk with Mimi, Elma, and Mei, and come to a decision together. Girls can be more direct with each other, right? That'll make me feel better, too." As a man, of course I appreciated more partners. But I already had Mimi and Elma, who were honestly more than enough for me. Bringing more girls into the mix just seemed like too much; I almost felt guilty. Besides, I didn't want to damage my relationship with them and Mei.

"I think you should do whatever makes you happy," Mimi said.

"Why not, right?" Elma added. "They're not people who are off limits, like Chris or the lieutenant commander."

"That was quick."

"The three of you seem like you'll get along. Besides, I need some drinking buddies." Elma shrugged. That was fair—I wasn't a drinker, Mimi couldn't hold her alcohol, and Mei was an inorganic Maidroid, so drinking was out.

Mimi smiled, unbothered. “Now I’ll have juniors!” She pumped both fists in excitement.

Heh, I guess she would like that. She had come aboard before Elma, but Elma had been a mercenary for a long time, so she was like a senior to both of us. Mei’s specs were simply too high, making her almost like a teacher to Mimi.

“Uh…” I struggled for something to say. “Well, okay. You all have fun. I’m tired, so I’m gonna take a bath and rest.”

Our crew was about to grow once more. Things would be a little cramped until we received the mothership, but hey—it’d be a good chance to get to know each other.

***

When I arrived at the shipyard to pick up the *Krishna*, Tina and Wiska were already there for some reason.

“Took you long enough!”

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

“H-hi?” I greeted them. The factory manager was nowhere to be seen. *Actually, didn’t they say something about management training? That must be what he’s doing.* “What are you two up to?”

“You’re finally getting your ship back, and we reckon we’ll be on board quite a bit in the future, so we wanted to see if you could take us with you for a little drive.” Tina looked at me expectantly.

“You know I’m just moving it to another hangar, right?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. We just wanna see how this baby moves. You mind?”

“I guess not.” Tina grinned broadly. Wiska looked oddly relieved, too. *It’s really not going to be that exciting, you guys.* “Anyway, let’s get this ship out of here. Do I need to sign some paperwork or something?”

After taking care of the details with the deputy factory manager, we boarded and looked over the interior.

“Mei, perform a thorough scan to make sure they haven’t installed anything fishy,” I ordered as soon as we closed the hatch.

“Leave it to me.” Mei began examining the cargo space.

Seeing this, Tina chuckled. “Cautious, ain’tcha?”

“I don’t want anyone making my life harder.”

“We’ll strive to be worthy of your trust,” Wiska said.

“Good luck with that.” As long as they were employees of Space Dwergr, it would be hard for me to fully trust them. I had nothing against the twins, but given their position, they would prioritize Space Dwergr’s profits over everything except their own lives. “Not that corporations matter in the black of space.”

“It’s not like the boss is out there, after all,” Wiska added.

“We can drink all we want!”

“How exciting.”

I stared. *Is Space Dwergr okay? Should I really be letting these two aboard my ship?*

On the other hand, I was well aware that it would be nigh impossible for them to come aboard my ship as spies. Even if they evaded Mei’s eyes and stole data on the *Krishna*, they had almost no way of transmitting it. It would be one thing if we were only a system or two from Vlad Prime, but a job could take mercenaries dozens and dozens of star systems away from home. It would take a massive effort to transmit data at a distance like that.

Space Dwergr had branches on colonies all over the empire, so they wouldn’t necessarily have to transmit it all the way to the Vlad System, but I still think they’d run into a lot of trouble. After all, if we discovered they were snooping, we could simply toss them out the airlock. There was no question of the risk they would be taking if they really intended to steal data. I doubted Space Dwergr would ask them to do it, given the danger.

Besides, Space Dwergr would probably benefit more if I simply used the mothership they sold me. All things considered, I figured the company wouldn’t really do anything to earn my ire, though there was no telling if they were actually that logical.

“Hand to God: The company ain’t givin’ us any crazy orders. All they told us is to earn your trust and show our sincerity.”

“Sis is right. Besides, I would be too afraid to do anything like that. Especially with Mei around…”

“Ya got that right.”

“Yep, not happening.”

The sisters agreed. Yeah, I could understand that. It would be too terrifying to hurt Mei’s master with the full knowledge that she was watching. If I were them, I would never do it, no matter what my employer said. I prefer to live, thanks.

“Okay, that’s enough scary talk,” Elma cut in. “We’re all friends and coworkers now, so let’s get along.”

“Right!” Mimi agreed. “First, I’d like some tea from the ship’s main chef.”

“Oh, yeah!” I remembered. “We got the newest model of the Steel Chef series! I’m excited.”

“Umm…” Wiska looked up at me nervously. *Yeah, yeah, my bad.*

“The dessert is great, too. I recommend the pudding.”

“That sounds lovely!” Wiska smiled in relief. I wondered why, but whatever. I left Mimi to get the twins fed and went around to check the ship. We would have a lot more cargo now, so I’d have to think about how to cram it all in.

We moved the *Krishna* from the maintenance dock to the port district and took a nice break. I was tired, naturally, but Tina and Wiska were beyond exhausted—both mentally and physically—from the excitement of the last few days.

***

“A-are you really gonna go?” Tina asked the next day.

“Yeah, I am.”

“B-b-but you’ll be fine, right?” Wiska stammered.

“He’ll be fine!” Mimi reassured them. “Space pirates are like the tiniest of tiny enemies to him!”

I had decided to go on a test drive and hunt a few pirates. I could’ve rested, given all that’d happened the day before, but it was tedious to sit around the ship all day. Besides, I needed to run the *Krishna* through its paces after the overhaul. I was just thinking about heading four systems over and doing a little hunting.

I had to go so far afield because the Vlad System had no pirates. If they tried to come into the system, dwarven engineers thirsting for practical battle data would gleefully launch their prototypes and turn those pirates into mincemeat.

“Feel absolutely free to take them for a ride-along!” Sara smiled on the holo-display. I had just told her that I was taking the *Krishna* on a little pirate-hunting jaunt. She seemed a little too cheerful to see Tina and Wiska pale and trembling like leaves behind me after all the trouble they had caused.

It might seem a little mean-spirited, but to be fair, it would be strange *not* be cross with them. Not only did they almost lose the company a big customer, they’d even forced the higher-ups to come in and personally apologize. Yesterday’s fiasco was just the cherry on top. I pretended not to see the darkness in Sara’s smile.

I pointed the twins toward two sub-seats that pulled out from the cockpit’s wall, made sure their seat harnesses were secure, and began launch preparations.

The girls had all left the room together to put a certain something on the twins before getting them seated. *You know what I mean, right? C’mon. Something to make cleanup easier if they accidentally wet themselves.* Mimi had graduated from that precaution recently, so we hadn’t used them since. We were lucky that we still had some around.

“Generators operating normally, output stable,” Elma announced. “Power transfer to all systems looks good, too.”

“Does anything feel different after the overhaul?” I asked.

“Nope. It’s the mark of professional work to dismantle something and put it back together without any noticeable changes.”

“Fair enough. Mimi?”

“No problems here, either,” she replied. “The departure request has been accepted.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go.” I placed my hands on the controls and launched the *Krishna* out of the port district.

“How is it?” Elma asked me.

“Not bad. The *Krishna* still fits like a glove.” Its response speed was in another league from the prototype ships. The feeling of total control was refreshing. This was what piloting a battleship should feel like.

“Ooh. Nice and smooth, ain’t it?”

“This ship has beautiful inertial control,” Wiska noted. “It’s not shaky at all. I can hardly feel it accelerate.”

“If you pushed this thing to its full potential, I bet even this inertial control couldn’t keep up. Ain’t that right?”

“Right…” Mimi groaned. “When we’re in battle, inertia does start to take a toll.”

“Don’t go into battle with a full stomach, or we all might live to regret it,” I chuckled.

“Don’t even! I don’t wanna fight covered in puke.” Elma frowned at me from the co-pilot’s seat. She looked pissed. *Yeah, I don’t like the idea either.*

“A-ah ha ha… W-we’ll be fine. I had some tea, but it was just a cup.”

“Y-yeah. Right.”

The talk of battle maneuvers reminded the twins we were about to face real pirates, and they went pale again. Engineering talk seemed to distract them, so I decided to take a quick spin around the colony to get my hand back in with the ship before entering FTL.

“Hm? Shouldn’t we activate the FTL drive?” Mimi asked.

“Nah,” I replied. “Let’s take it slow.”

“He was piloting ships with totally different handling for a while,” Elma explained. “It’s important to get his bearings.”

“I see…”

I slowly raised the throttle as Mimi and Elma chatted. The *Krishna* accelerated faster and faster.

Yep, throttle and thrusters looking good. That’s dwarves for you. It seemed like they had done a bang-up job.

“Oooh, now this is *speed*,” Tina said.

“You’d figure a small ship would be fast, but this is a whole other level,” Wiska added.

Once I reached top speed, I turned off flight assist mode, switched to manual, and began executing battle maneuvers.

“Whoooooa!”

“Aaaaaaah!”

I decelerated and used the afterburners to execute a quick run-through of sharp turns, inertia slides, reverse attacks, barrel rolls, and the like.

“Everything looks good,” I said, satisfied. “Let’s hit it.”

“Okay,” Mimi replied. “Initiating faster-than-light drive.”

“Charging,” Elma announced. “Five, four, three, two, one… Activating.”

Boom! The *Krishna* switched to FTL travel. The twins’ heads were spinning, but they’d get used to it before long.

“I-is it always like this?!” Tina screamed.

“Yeah, kind of…” Mimi said.

“Now I can see where you got your nerves of steel…” Wiska chimed in. Did Mimi have nerves of steel? *I don’t think so… Well, she does seem a lot less panicky lately. Maybe the steel nerves are from working with us.*

“Now, let’s head to the neighboring star system,” I declared. “Have you two ever traveled by hyperlane?”

“I’ve been ’round the hyper-block a few times.”

“I’ve experienced it, too, but never in a small ship’s cockpit.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat. Hyperlane scenery is a hell of a sight.” I followed Mimi’s navigation to enter the hyperlane. For now, we just had to get to our hunting ground. Barring any unexpected dangers, it should be a smooth ride—a chance for both me and the mechanic twins to get familiar with the *Krishna*.

Though we *were* just flying to a random place without gathering information beforehand, so it was totally possible that we’d find nothing. If nothing else, it might just be a little asteroid belt sightseeing tour.

***

“Aagh, they’re shooting at us! We’re bein’ shot at!”

“I-i-it’s okay, Sis! This ship’s shields can take lasers like that just fine!”

“Missiles! They shot missiles! Missiles bad!”

“M-missiles are bad, aren’t they?!”

“They sure are lively,” I chuckled.

“More like annoying,” said Elma, rolling her eyes.

“Ah ha ha… Was I like this?” Mimi giggled as the twins panicked.

***

Let’s rewind things a few minutes.

When we reached the asteroid belt, we came right up next to another ship. I scanned it for signs that it was a mining ship, but no. It was the first of a whole gaggle of pirate ships! Thirteen, including a medium-sized craft.

“Lucky!”

“Nononono, this is bad. *Bad* luck. Running into pirates is clearly bad, right?!” I ignored Tina and continued scanning.

“Th-there are thirteen ships, right?” Wiska asked, pale-faced. “And that medium craft looks specialized for firepower. I don’t think it’s safe to __”

“It’s okay!” Mimi reassured them. “They’re no problem for him.”

“No way! This ship is great and all, but we’re dead meat if that thing hammers us with missiles!”

“It doesn’t matter if they can’t hit you.” I quoted the Red Comet as I deployed my weapons. Now, my four heavy lasers and two large flak cannons were ready to fire at any time. We were battle-ready.

“You said we wouldn’t run into any sudden battles!”

“I-I’m still not ready… Hyaaaah?!”

***

And that brings us to now.

With weapons deployed, I began my attack on the enemy from behind, shooting down two small pirate ships with my four heavy lasers. As usual, they began to scream over comms.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“It’s an ambush! Spread out!”

“As if you’ll make it in time,” I muttered.

The pirates rushed to disperse, but the *Krishna* had already closed in on them, tearing into their hulls with a steady stream of fire from my two flak cannons. Before long all three of the ships in front of me were punched with holes from countless bits of shrapnel.

“N-no! I don’t wanna die, I don’t—”

The cannon must have hit something vital, because just then, the ship exploded. The other two ships, caught in the blast, went up as well.

But the pirates wouldn’t sit around waiting for me to massacre them. The scattered ships turned around and started shooting their lasers and multi-cannons my way. Those things were like weak little pea shooters to

the *Krishna*, so they were nothing for us to worry about. Still, they were clearly visible on our HUD, streaking through space toward the holographic display of our ship.

Mimi, Elma, and I knew they weren't worth a second thought, but Tina and Wiska didn't have that experience.

"Aagh, they're shooting at us! We're bein' shot at!" Tina screamed, tears streaming down her face.

"I-i-it's okay, Sis! This ship's shields can take lasers like that just fine!" Wiska was visibly calmer, though her voice was trembling. While I chuckled to myself, an alert rang out in the cockpit.

"Missiles! They shot missiles! Missiles bad!"

"M-missiles are bad, aren't they?!"

"They sure are lively."

"More like annoying."

"Ah ha ha… Was I like this?"

Tina's panic was funny, but I also had to laugh hearing Wiska state the obvious. *Yep, missiles bad.* I used the thrusters and scattered flares to shake off the approaching seeker missiles and turned a perfect ninety-degree angle.

"Eyaaah!"

"Aaaargh!"

The twins were overtaken by inertia that couldn't be fully suppressed by our inertial control system. Both unleashed their own unique screams.

"Wanna start with the medium one?" Elma suggested.

"If I did that, the small ones would run away. Let's start by killing off all the little guys."

The medium craft had strong weapons, sure, but it seemed to be a missile ship. As long as I watched for seeker missiles, we'd be just fine. We had plenty of flares left, and if I wanted, I could always use some trick flying to shake them off.

"Yeeeeeah! Let's rock and roll!"

“Dammit, what’s with this guy?!” one pirate screamed. “Shoot him down!”

Ha ha ha! If you want to take me down, you’ll need a better ship. Maybe if you get a military-grade one, eh?

Not that I would ever lose to unskilled pirates, no matter what.

***

“I don’t feel too good…”

“Urk…”

A bit after the battle, the twins felt well enough to start speaking again. Tina looked dead tired, and Wiska was blushing and fidgeting uncomfortably. *Yep, she peed herself. No problem, though; getting her to wear the thing was a good idea.*

“They have plenty of cargo,” Mimi mused. “They must have just finished their dirty work.”

“Lots of purified metal, huh?” Elma added. “And some nice bounties.”

“How much did we get?”

“Their bounties alone were 112,000 Ener,” Mimi replied. “Most of it was on the medium ship.”

“Over a hundred thousand?! You ain’t kidding, right?”

“Goodness. Does that include profit from selling loot?”

“We won’t know until we sell it,” Elma answered, “but the purified metal should fetch a high price. Twenty thousand might be a safe guess?”

“So 132,000 Ener, huh? Makes working stiffs like us look like suckers.”

“How many years of our salary is that…?”

I didn’t know their salaries, but first-rate engineers were sure to make a lot of money.

“Umm…” Tina scratched her head. “We get about thirty-seven hundred a month. So that’s like…thirty-five months of pay, ain’t it?”

“Almost three years…”

The girls started whispering to each other. *Just so you know, you’re risking your lives here. Engineering can be dangerous work too, but it’s a totally different level. Of course mercenaries make more money for greater risk.*

“Wanna quit working at Space Dwergr and join the crew for real?” I offered. “We pay well.”

“Ulp… T-tempting offer, that.”

“Don’t get sucked in that easily, Sis! It’s twenty thousand Ener just to buy our right to free ourselves from the company. We can’t even pay for one of us with our savings.”

“Ugh… Yeah, true.” Tina pouted at Wiska’s matter-of-fact tone.

While we talked, the girls finished picking up the loot. Nothing had hit the ship’s plating today; we had eradicated the pirates with our shields intact. Total victory.

“Okay, these are good results. Let’s make our triumphant return.”

“Yes, sir!” Mimi saluted. “Setting the route now.”

“I’m thinking a victory party today,” Elma said. “Let’s go somewhere with good liquor.”

We turned into the hyperlane back to the Vlad System and accelerated. It seemed Space Dwergr had done a fine job with the *Krishna*. I decided to give Sara a ring once we returned to the colony.

***

After the battle, Wiska went straight to the bathroom. Unluckily for her, her sister witnessed the whole thing. I mean, it probably didn’t have anything to do with luck; given how quickly Wiska rushed out, Tina probably had an inkling.

“Ah ha ha!”

“Stop laughing at me!” Wiska screamed at her sister, blushing furiously. *This would be a bad time for me to laugh too, right?*

“Heh! Didn’t think you’d pee yourself, Wiska! Ha ha!”

“Sis!” Wiska turned an even brighter shade of red and lunged at her sister to slap a hand over her big mouth. Since they were the same size, it didn’t really go as planned.

“I’m surprised you seem so fine after all that screaming, Tina,” I said.

“Maybe she wasn’t as scared because she spewed all the fear out her mouth,” Elma joked.

“So Tina flows up, while Wiska flows down?” I quipped.

“Excuse me!” Wiska scolded me, still scuffling with Tina. She didn’t have to be so self-conscious; Mimi had the same issue for a while, after all.

I glanced at Mimi, who locked eyes with me. Her cheeks flushed a little as she looked away awkwardly. Even though she had been through it, it would be embarrassing for me to mention it. As for me, I’d never had to worry about that, probably because I’d gained so much experience in-game. Or maybe it was because this still didn’t quite feel real to me.

“Hiro…” Elma shook her head.

“Okay, okay, please excuse me for that one. A man should always strive to be a gentleman.”

“You? A gentleman? Sounds highly unlikely.”

“Rude!” I exclaimed…though privately I agreed. I would definitely have trouble acting gentlemanly all the time—it was just too uptight for me.

Chapter 8:
The *Black Lotus* is Born

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since our pirate-hunting quest. We'd spent our time since then lazing around the ship.

I could afford the time off. I had enough cash on hand not to worry about working immediately, and we'd want to test out the mothership on another pirate-hunting excursion when we got it anyway, so it wasn't worth it to use the *Krishna* alone right now. The test drive from a few days ago was enough, anyway.

Besides, it's not like we just holed up on the ship the entire time. I went shopping with Mimi, checked out bars with Elma and the dwarves, and even went with Mei to the imperial army's local station to claim our bounties.

We earned a total of 112,000 Ener on the pirates' bounties and 23,000 Ener selling their loot, bringing us to a total of 135,000 Ener.

Mimi's cut was 1 percent now, instead of 0.5 percent, so she received 1,350 Ener. Elma's usual 3 percent earned her 4,050. The remaining 129,600 Ener was my cut. Honestly, it really looked like I was making an unfair amount of money.

But the ship *was* a hundred percent mine, and I was the one actually doing the fighting. I was also paying for their food, clothes, and shelter, and I naturally provided benefits. I'd say I was giving them an awful lot. When you thought about it like that, these rewards seemed totally adequate. The guild had also approved the numbers, so I doubted there was any issue.

If the ship was under our joint ownership, things would be very different. Each person's cut would mostly be based on how much they had paid for the ship.

"It's finally delivery time!" Mimi bounced excitedly on the way to the dock where our mothership awaited us.

"Yeah," Elma said. "It feels like we've waited forever. By the way, have you picked a name yet?"

“A name, huh? I guess a ship does need a name.” What kind of name, though? I didn’t really care about ship names, so I had always used the default names given to ships. “Why not just *Skithblathnir*?”

“No reason, but…why not have some fun with it?”

What do you mean by fun? I guess Skithblathnir *is long and hard to say, though.* As I recalled, *Skithblathnir* was the name of a ship in Norse mythology, while *Krishna* was the name of a Hindu mythological hero.

I think it was one of Vishnu’s avatars? It would be difficult to think of a name that reconciled these two; after all, they were totally different legends. And I had some knowledge of Norse mythology, but none of Indian. I only knew about Krishna because I looked the name up online after receiving the ship.

C’mon, dig something out of that vague memory. Hmmm…oh, how about this?

“How does the name *Garuda* sound?”

“Garuda?”

“It’s the name of a legendary bird. Krishna is an incarnation of a god named Vishnu, and Garuda is a bird as bright as flame that Vishnu rides…or something.” I had never seen any illustrations of Vishnu riding Garuda, but whatever.

“A bird, huh?” Elma thought for a moment. “But it doesn’t really look like a bird.”

“That’s…true.” The Skithblathnir was big and chunky. It didn’t have any of the grace and agility one associated with a bird. Elma was right that it didn’t match. “How about something like *Lotus*, then?”

“Lotus…that’s a kind of plant, right?” Wiska asked, looking up at me. Plants were rare on the colonies, so she had clearly done her research.

“That’s right. Back in my homeland, God is often depicted sitting on a lotus.” In Buddhism, the Buddha would often sit cross-legged or stand on a lotus seat. It seemed like a pretty good place for a god to sit, I’d say. And Hindu and Buddhist concepts often overlapped.

“God?” Elma repeated. “Do you believe in that, Hiro?”

“Not at all. I just know the stories. They’re pretty good sometimes; I love mythology.”

“Wow,” Tina gasped. “How about you tell us some myths some time, hon?”

“My memory of most of them is pretty foggy, but I’ll try if you’d like. Anyway, we’re getting off topic. How does *Lotus* sound?” I steered the conversation back to the matter at hand demanded an answer from Elma.

“Lotuses are white or pink though, right? Our new mothership is all dark blue and black like the *Krishna*, y’know.”

“*Black Lotus*, then. It makes it sound strong and expensive.”

“Strong and expensive…?” Mimi asked, totally confused by my claim.

“Never mind that.” *Should I get ready to add three mana of any single color of my choice?*

“I think it fits better than *Garuda*,” Elma said.

“Agreed,” Mimi chimed in. “Having a flower name is cute, too.”

“Sounds like we’re in agreement. Mei, are you okay with that?”

“Yes,” Mei, who had been following a bit behind us, agreed. Her hair and eyes were black, and her clothes were black and white. *Black Lotus* would be a good name for a ship under her control.

***

“There you are.”

Sara met us at the large dock. There were others from the company, but she was the only one I recognized. One of the men with her looked familiar; he might’ve been one of the higher-ups who came to apologize at the hotel. Honestly, it was hard to tell male dwarves apart with all their scruffy facial hair.

“Hey,” I greeted her, looking up at the newest model of Skithblathnir. “The time has finally come, huh?” It was many times bigger than the

Krishna. The *Krishna* was already big for a small ship, so a ship that could fit two *Krishnas* in it was downright enormous.

The nearly flat plating covering its surface especially stood out. Of course, very few parts were perfectly flat; many had subtle curves. Maybe something to do with durability?

When viewed from the side, the ship was almost shaped like a laser rifle. The front jutted out boldly, its bow a rectangular prism with curved edges. Certain protrusions in the plating concealed the weapons underneath. Once we were ready to fight, they would slide open to reveal our firepower.

The large EML was installed atop the ship's bow. Like the other weaponry, it was concealed by plating that would slide open when it was time to kick ass.

"Mm, yeah, I like that. Very cool." There's something about brand-new spaceships that just tugs at the hearts of men. With all these weapons equipped to fulfill Mei's desires, the *Black Lotus* had even more instant firepower than the *Krishna*.

Though the EML was difficult to aim, it had power equal to the main weapon of any battleship. A direct hit could destroy even a ship like the *Krishna*. Any pirate ship that faced it would be blown to smithereens.

Spec-wise, the *Black Lotus* could stand alongside the cruisers of the imperial army's regular fleet. A single ship couldn't stand up to an entire regular fleet, after all; their fleet was made up of hundreds or even thousands of ships just as powerful as the *Black Lotus*. We'd die instantly if we went up against them.

The only reason I took the *Krishna* up against the Belbellum fleet and made it out alive was because I ambushed them, and because it was a super close-quarters battle. If I had charged in from the front without any kind of plan, I'd have evaporated long before I reached them.

How would one fight this *Black Lotus*? If you got close enough, the bottom would be a blind spot, so you would have to pile on the attacks from there. Coming in from the front would be suicide.

"He looks awfully excited, doesn't he?" Mimi mused.

“I hear men turn into starry-eyed little kids when they see new ships,” Elma chuckled.

“Adorable,” Mei said. All of us stared at her in wide-eyed surprise. “Is something the matter?”

“N-no, I guess not.” We were shocked by the unexpected outburst. I never thought Mei would call me adorable. Suddenly, embarrassment washed over me.

“We’re overjoyed that you are happy with the ship.” Apparently noticing that I was totally taken in by the ship, Sara smiled at me. *Damn! That was a mistake.* “Would you like to take a look inside?”

“Sure.”

Sara led us to the ladder, conveniently already lowered for us. We followed her up and into the ship. The living spaces were set up to be comfortable like the *Krishna*’s, but this hallway was fully standard. The designers clearly knew what they were doing, though—the hallway was wide for a starship, with no unnecessary protrusions. It was an extremely clean build; if there were an accident and someone smacked into a wall, there was nothing that might jut out and injure them.

“The walls are built to absorb impacts, huh?” Elma noted as she laid her hand the white wall.

I felt it, too, noticing its strange texture. It lacked luster and felt hard to the touch, but when I pressed down, it caved in slightly. Maybe you could call it a sturdy but amorphous plastic? This wasn’t any material I was familiar with. It was clearly some kind of high-tech polymer made in this universe.

“Right,” Sara confirmed. “It cushions impact should anyone be thrown into walls while the ship is in flight, and it works as a wonderful insulator, increasing energy efficiency.”

“I get it,” I said. “Higher insulation means lower air-conditioning costs, after all.”

“Correct.”

After playing with the wall for a little while, we headed to the hangar and cargo space.

“Whoooa. So this is our new workplace!”

“It’s very big,” Wiska said. “Full of state-of-the-art equipment, too.” As soon as we arrived, the mechanic twins started looking around. I had no idea what anything was, but it all seemed very surprising to them. “Wow! Sis, look at the maintenance bots!”

“Ooh! Yeah, we won’t have any trouble workin’ in this shop.”

There were a few different models of robots sitting in one corner. Some looked strong, while others were light and nimble. I had wondered if two people would be enough to maintain a ship this big, but now I saw how they had made up for the lack of manpower.

“This is pretty much your castle, girls, so manage it as you please,” I told them. “Let me know if you need refills or resupplies on anything. If it means keeping the *Krishna* in top shape, money is no object.”

“We’ve got all we need for now, but we’ll let ya know if we could use something.”

“Also, make sure you know where the emergency exits and evacuation routes are.” Since we were planning to use this ship as bait for pirates, it could end up in some risky situations. I figured the people on board were safe due to the powerful shields and plating, but one always needed to be prepared. “Anything here stick out to you? Are you sure it has everything you want?”

“All good, all good. Don’t worry about it, hon.”

I ignored Tina’s questioning look and surveyed the hangar. It was massive compared to the *Krishna*’s. With this, we could easily work as couriers or in commerce. That gave us plenty more money-making options.

“Shall we check the cockpit next?” Sara suggested. “We can stop by the break room and cafeteria on the way there.”

“Sure. How about you two?” I asked the twins. “Wanna keep looking around here?”

“Nah, we’ll come with. We can look around the workshop any time.”

“Fair.”

We all followed Sara out of the hangar. The mothership was truly vast.

***

We continued our tour of the ship. Despite the sheer size of the Skithblathnir (now dubbed the *Black Lotus*), it didn't require a large team of personnel: it was designed to be operated by a single person if needed. High-quality automation took care of many of the ship's basic operations, but I knew little about how this universe had developed such conveniences.

My understanding of things was based on *Stella Online*, in which one player could control one or more ships freely. In the game, it was obviously necessary that each ship could be controlled by a single player.

But it felt rather strange now that I was in a universe like—but not the same as—*SOL*. Wouldn't it be cheaper to hire more people than to go so far overboard with automation? The cost of hiring someone isn't *that* high, after all. Tina and Wiska would know more about it than me, so I figured I could ask them later.

Sara turned to us with a confident smile. "This is your break room."

The break room was huge. I'd say it was the size of a hotel's banquet hall, easily big enough for a child to run around in.

"Wow!" Mimi gasped. "It's so big!"

"For sure," Elma agreed. "The *Krishna*'s cafeteria is relaxing enough, but this break room seems even more so. Ooh! Look, there's a terrarium over there." She walked over to a green space in the corner of the room.

Part of the wall was made from glass, with a space on the other side made up to look like a natural environment. *Oh, wow. This looks like a place where you'd keep geckos and iguanas.*

But no matter how closely I looked, I only saw plants. I guess it was nice if you just wanted to relax in front of some greenery. *Shame. It'd be cool if it had some animals in there.* I lost interest pretty quickly, but Mimi and Elma stared at it for a while with great curiosity.

As a colonist, Mimi had never seen plants. In Elma's case, it probably touched her elf instincts in some way. Not that I'd know.

The room also had a couch and a table to hang out at, a drink machine, and even a massage chair. It was definitely worthy of the title *break room.*

"The cafeteria, training room, and showers are all located nearby," Sara explained. "There are also the unused crew rooms and the infirmary. You could call this the residential wing of the *Black Lotus*."

She showed us around the rest of the so-called residential wing. The cafeteria was bigger than the *Krishna*'s, and it had a Steel Chef 5 automatic cooker as well. The *Krishna*'s cafeteria could squeeze us all in, but this one would definitely be more comfortable for the five of us.

Likewise, the training room was bigger than the *Krishna*'s. It had machines that the *Krishna* didn't have, and was large enough that the whole crew could train at the same time. The *Krishna*'s training room was small, so it was already cramped with just us three.

Maybe in the mornings I would be better off coming to this training room, showering, and then using the cafeteria on this ship. With the bigger break room, this place seemed more relaxing. Mimi and Elma seemed very into the terrarium, too. *How do we take care of that, anyway? Is it automated like those food processing plants from before? Probably, otherwise those plants would die really fast.*

"Now, let us head to the cockpit."

"Whoooa. Everything really is bigger on motherships." It was big, though not as big as the break room. I'd say ten people could fit in here comfortably. Unlike the *Krishna*'s cockpit, which was situated at the nose of the ship, the *Black Lotus*'s cockpit was near the center. You could say it was more of a bridge than a cockpit.

"During travel, I will typically be in this seat controlling all of the ship's functions." Mei gestured toward a station covered in specialized upgrades. It had a bunch of strange terminals and the like. Clearly, it was no normal seat.

"It's a very, uh, flashy seat," I replied.

“Yes. It is a custom seat made to put my positronic brain’s processing capabilities to full use. With this specialized control station, I can simultaneously control the ship’s maneuvering, manage weapons, adjust output, control life support and more.”

“Holy crap. And you know how to do all that?”

“Yes, without issue.”

“Super. Then I leave all that in your capable hands.”

“As you say.” Mei nodded to me. It seemed I wouldn’t have to worry about this ship at all.

“It looks like you don’t need any help with this room,” Sara said with a smile. “That pretty much concludes our tour. Do you have any questions?”

“Not really,” I replied. “Girls?”

“I don’t have any questions.”

“Same.”

“No problems.”

“All good!”

“Yes, all good.”

It seemed everyone was ready to go.

“Lovely,” Sara said. “Would you please sign this form? Yes, that will do.”

I signed the receipt on Sara’s tablet, confirmed it with my own terminal, and officially took ownership of the *Black Lotus*. With this, the remainder of the money would be sent to Space Dwergr. Transaction complete. Sara heaved a sigh of relief. This transaction was probably a whole lot of stress for her, mainly thanks to the twins.

As for me? I…don’t really think I caused much trouble myself. Though I can’t deny that Sara was unfortunate to run into me, a trouble magnet. But I never did anything rude on purpose. *Not my fault! Don’t blame me!*

“Thanks for everything, Sara.”

“Oh, it’s no…well, yes. I did put a lot into this.” Apparently remembering everything she’d been through, Sara changed her tune from modest to…slightly traumatized. *Damn, she’s had a lot to deal with. You can tell she’s a hard worker.* “These negotiations have been a valuable experience for me. Thank you again, Captain Hiro.”

“Oh, I should be thanking you. I don’t think it was *all* my fault, but you still went through some trouble.”

“No, no, you’ve done nothing wrong…ha ha.” Sara chuckled darkly as she glared at the mechanic twins. *Hey, no. Don’t hide behind me! I don’t wanna get caught up in this! Also, Sara, could you put away that black aura? Calm! Calm down! Why are you turning so savage?!*

Forget it. If she goes feral, there’s nothing I can do about it. Leave me out of it.

“They’ve been sticking to their prohibition,” I told Sara. “And they’ll be living the dangerous mercenary life from now on.”

“Right. It’s all water under the bridge now.”

I’m not sure whether my words helped, but Sara finally put away her scary aura. *Thanks; I was actually terrified.*

“For now,” I continued, “we’re planning to stay on this colony and take the *Black Lotus* for a few test runs. If we find any issues while testing it, we’ll let you know.”

“Yes, please do not hesitate to tell us. We hope to serve you again.” A real smile found its way onto Sara’s youthful face.

***

“Okay, girls! Let’s launch this bad boy!”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Mimi saluted.

“Yeah, yeah,” Elma groaned. “Mei, are you ready?”

“Yes. I am ready to launch at any time.”

Thirty minutes after we left Sara, we sat in the *Krishna*'s cockpit. Our plan was to dock with the *Black Lotus* and then practice launching from it. We had a lot of team training to do with the mothership in general. I was sure that Mei and I could make things work even when the going got tough, but you can never be too careful with such valuable property.

"After we launch, we'll rendezvous at a point far from the colony and get to training. Mark the coordinates, please."

"Okay!" Mimi confirmed. "I've marked the target location."

"And so have I," Mei added. "Sending departure request."

"I'll send ours, too." Mimi sent a departure request to the Port Authority, which was swiftly accepted.

Vlad Prime was just as busy as ever today. I maneuvered carefully to avoid hitting other ships, slipping past the *Black Lotus* along the way.

"Mmm, yeah, that's sick," I said in utter awe. "I'm getting excited."

"It's so big from this angle! It's like a large pirate ship, isn't it?"

"Yup," Elma chimed in. "It just barely fits into the category of large ship."

This close, the *Black Lotus* looked more intimidating and less graceful than its name would suggest. As much as the smooth surfaces and rounded corners tried to soften the exterior, *chunky* was the only word that described it. The plating that bulged out to conceal weapons only exacerbated the effect. If I had to compare it to something, I'd say it was as intimidating as a sheathed sword.

Sorry, I tried to make that sound cool.

What it really reminded me of was of a guy in black clothes with an unnatural bulge in his chest pocket. Like he'd reach in there and whip out a weapon the moment anything shifty happened. And that impression was not that off; once this ship's concealed weapons were revealed, it wielded more firepower than a military cruiser.

"Man, it's chunky," I said. "I know the weapons are concealed by plating, but don't they stand out anyway?"

“You can’t tell from a distance unless you look closely,” Elma said with a shrug. “I think it’s fine.”

“Maybe…” Pirates were dumbasses anyway, so she was probably right. They would think we were easy, defenseless prey, but they would soon be faced with the *Krishna* and a very heavily armed mothership. There was no more terrifying death trap for pirates.

“The *Black Lotus* has launched,” Mei informed us over comms.

“Understood. Let’s head to the marked point, then.”

“Okay. I’ll set up travel alongside the *Black Lotus*.” Mimi synchronized our FTL drive with the *Black Lotus*’s. It was a much bigger ship, so the *Krishna* would essentially piggyback off its FTL.

“I will now begin faster-than-light travel to the designated point,” Mei announced. “Charging now. Counting down.” We heard the countdown over the comms. “Five, four, three, two, one… Initiating FTL.”

Boom! Both the *Black Lotus* and the *Krishna* plunged into FTL drive.

***

“Designated point reached. Exiting faster-than-light travel,” Mei said on the display. In the next instant, another boom signaled our return to normal travel. It was a short FTL ride, but we had gone far enough that the massive Vlad Prime wasn’t even a pinprick on the display anymore.

“We should be good now,” I declared.

“Yes, agreed. I will now open the hangar hatch.”

“Gotcha.”

Mei was efficiency itself in her work. Once our FTL drive test finished, she was immediately ready for the docking test.

As I maneuvered toward the docking hatch at the lower back of the *Black Lotus*, the hatch emitted a guide beam for me. Mothership guide beams were a type of tractor beam, so once we touched the light, we were automatically drawn to it. Less work for me; as soon as you’re within a guide beam’s pull, the docking ship doesn’t have to do anything.

If I really wanted, I could dock manually. But crashing into the ship at high speed could cause a ton of damage, so I decided not to make things harder for no reason. The guide beam towed us through the airtight shield, and we docked safely in the *Black Lotus*'s hangar. The hatch closed behind us.

"Looks like we're good."

"Yes," Mei responded. "I have told the twins to check the hangar's equipment, so please stand by."

"Understood."

The landing pad began to rotate, turning the *Krishna* 180 degrees to face the hatch again. The pad would then catapult us out of the ship when it was time to launch.

This hangar would be the *Krishna*'s home from now on. We would keep it docked here and only jump out when something was up.

In the light of the ship's sensors, I saw the twins running around.

"Those two are really going for it."

"Yeah. Dwarf women are so small and cute!" Mimi watched over them like a protective older sister. *You know they're older than you, right? Even if it is funny to watch what looks like little girls running around the hangar with their maintenance bots.*

"The different kinds of maintenance bots are interesting, too," I noted.

"Right? I have no idea what they all do."

"They must need that many bots to take care of this whole workshop with just the two of them," Elma said. "The *Krishna* is small, but it's still too much for two people to handle alone."

"Figures."

Despite being a small ship, the *Krishna* had enough space for five people to live in relative comfort. It also had an engine room and other operational spaces, so I'd say it was about the size of a large airplane. Or maybe even a little bigger?

The *Black Lotus* had a big enough hangar to fit two *Krishna*s, an even bigger cargo space, and a residential wing large enough to accommodate up to thirty people. The whole ship was about 300 meters from nose to tail. From my point of view, that's ridiculously huge. Of course two girls couldn't maintain a ship of that size alone. It was natural that they'd use maintenance bots.

Tasks completed, Tina and Wiska stepped away from the *Krishna*.

"Master, the equipment check is complete. We will now perform the launch test."

"Got it. We're ready any time."

"Yes. Opening hatch. Deploying catapult. Three, two, one… Launch."

My body was pressed back into my seat as the *Krishna* shot out into space. Was this how it felt to be launched from a catapult? It almost felt like a roller coaster.

"I could definitely still feel the acceleration through our inertial control," I said.

"Yeah," Mimi agreed. "I didn't expect that…"

At least there wasn't enough g-force to knock us unconscious. No problems there, though I had to wonder why our inertial control didn't work. Maybe it reacted too late because the force came from outside?

"I will leave the hatch open, so please attempt auto-docking," Mei told us. "After that, try doing so manually."

"Manually too, huh? Okay." I doubted we would ever need to do that, but you never know, so we might as well practice while we had the chance. You'd only dock manually if you were really screwed, so it would definitely be better to practice now instead of winging it in an emergency.

We practiced docking and launching a few times before testing the weapons. At Mei's command, the concealment plates all slid back at once to reveal them.

"Very flashy."

“That’s incredible,” Mimi gasped. “It’s scary to think that those are lasers, but they’re pretty.”

“Yeah, ‘pretty’ if you’re just watching,” Elma said sarcastically. “But I don’t wanna be in their firing range.”

“Certainly not…”

Seeing twelve laser cannons fire at once was truly a sight to behold.

The *Black Lotus* was equipped with eight Class-II laser cannons and four Class-III, for a total of twelve. And though they weren’t firing at the moment, it also had ten seeker missile pods and one large EML. It far outstripped the *Krishna* in power alone.

“I’ve finished checking the weapons. Next, I will confirm maneuverability.”

“Yeah, go for it.”

The *Black Lotus’*s afterburners erupted as it accelerated. Given its mass, the acceleration was slow, but with its powerful thrusters, it had a higher top speed than expected. When it came to escaping pirate ambushes, you needed a high top speed to shake them off, so in that regard it was sufficient.

“Whoa. That thing can move, huh?”

“Definitely more than I anticipated,” Elma agreed.

“Really?”

Elma and I raised our eyebrows at the *Black Lotus*’s unexpected speed. Mimi seemed puzzled by our reaction. Really though, it could *move*—its turning capability was especially surprising. Motherships could usually go fast in a straight line, but they had trouble making tight turns, so they were vulnerable if small ships stuck close to them. Using the size of the motherships against it, the little guys could just fire away at any blind spots as long as they wanted.

But the *Black Lotus* could turn a lot faster than we thought. Its turning maneuvers were supported not just by rotational thrusters, but also attitude-control thrusters. The engineers must have designed it with my battle style in mind.

“What do you think, Elma?” I asked.

“It’s faster than I thought, but not enormously so. I guess it’d work against crappy pirates with crappy ships?”

“Very true.”

Though it was impressive for its class, it was only a minor improvement in speed to us. Maybe enough to help against pirates. *Maybe*. We couldn’t expect many crazy maneuvers from the *Black Lotus*. Given that it was pretty much built to be a heavy-firepower ship, that wasn’t much of a surprise.

While we watched the *Black Lotus* fly all around the sector, there was a sudden *boom* that heralded the appearance of multiple ships. From their exteriors, they looked imperial.

The comms lit up immediately. “This is the imperial fleet, Vlad System’s third division. Respond at once.” Did they think we were in battle or something?

“Mercenary guild member *Krishna*, Captain Hiro speaking. The big ship over there is our mothership, the *Black Lotus*. We just bought it, so we were taking it for a little spin out here. How’s it hanging?”

“I see. Hold on a moment.”

“Aye aye.” I heard the alert that informed us we were being scanned. We had nothing to hide, so I didn’t mind. They were probably doing the same to the *Black Lotus*.

“Master, the fleet wishes to inspect the ship,” Mei informed me.

“We don’t have anything illegal, so let ’em. Not that I like being suspected when we’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Understood.”

“Also, we’re docking the *Krishna* so we can join in. Get ready for that.”

“Understood.” I hung up and had Mimi contact the imperial fleet.

“This is Captain Hiro,” I greeted them again. “We’re going to dock on the *Black Lotus* and join you for your inspection. The *Black Lotus* has

landing pads for two small ships, so you can send your inspectors to Pad Two on a small ship."

"Will do. Thank you for your cooperation."

Closing the comms line, I headed toward the *Black Lotus*. I would've liked to test out the ship's maneuverability in the asteroid belt, but it seemed we wouldn't be so lucky. We might have to undergo more inspections with cargo in the future, so I decided to obey their orders and consider it preliminary training.

***

A few minutes after I landed the *Krishna*, one of the imperial fleet's dropships touched down in the other hangar.

Dropships were small craft that could leave their motherships to infiltrate planets, colonies, or even spaceships. They landed in hangars when possible, such as this case, but they could also fly alongside ships, break through their plating, and infiltrate that way. They allowed their operators to turn ship battles into face-to-face fights.

They were like space versions of landing craft. Many of those could carry small vehicles and a large fighting force, and they came with anti-personnel lasers. The basic goal was to land in enemy territory and then use the ship as a sort of front-line base.

While I thought back on my many infiltration missions from *Stella Online*, imperial troops wielding laser rifles and wearing power armor alighted from their ship. They had over thirty soldiers. The number wearing power armor could be counted on both hands, but it would be impossible for Mei, Elma, and me to fight them all off.

"Hi there," I said, raising both hands in greeting. "I'm Hiro, captain and owner of this ship."

A soldier stepped forward. "Imperial Fleet, Vlad System's Third Landing Corps, Sixth Platoon Captain: Second Lieutenant Paul Dry. In accordance with Chapter Three, Article Seven of imperial law, we'll need to inspect your ship." Second Lieutenant Paul looked awfully young to be an

officer. Athletically built, with blue eyes and close-cropped blond hair, the man looked more like a pretty boy than a military tough.

"Go right ahead," I offered. "We just bought it, so the cargo space is going to be pretty empty."

"That it is," Second Lieutenant Paul grinned wryly. Even from here, one could see that the cargo hold was bare.

The only things in there were food and daily essentials from the *Krishna*. We had left only the bare minimum in there and moved the rest to the *Black Lotus*. Since we hadn't planned to head to other systems just yet, we hadn't bought much. We also had nothing to transport, so the cargo hold was pretty much just floor and walls.

"We will begin our inspection of your goods and ship."

"Cool," I answered. "Mind if I join you?"

"We would certainly appreciate it in case we have questions about your cargo. Also, we'll need to enter that small craft."

"No problem. Elma and Mimi, can you take care of that?"

"Sure."

"Yes, sir."

Imperial soldiers were big on discipline, so they probably wouldn't do anything shady.

"Sergeant Betty, take your group and inspect the small ship," Paul commanded.

"Yes sir." The sergeant and her subordinates trooped off to the *Krishna*, with Elma and Mimi following. Maybe Paul here was being polite by sending a group led by a woman.

While his subordinates pawed through our meager goods, Second Lieutenant Paul asked me a few questions, which I answered honestly: why we left port, why we were in this sector, where we got our goods. Basic, unintrusive questions.

"And you say this ship was just completed?" he asked. "It's practically sparkling. I almost can't believe a single man owns this entire ship."

“It cost a fortune. Twenty million Ener, in fact.”

“Twenty million…” Paul’s eyes glazed over.

“A first-class warrant officer makes four thousand Ener a month, right?” I recalled. “With that salary, it would take about 416 years to afford it. Heh. Yeah, that’s pretty insane.”

“Ah…” He raised an eyebrow. “How do you know a first-class warrant officer’s salary?”

“I had an offer to join the military at that rank. But I turn it down because the pay was too low.”

“…I suppose so.” Paul stared off into the distance. He probably made more than a first-class warrant officer, but even Lieutenant Commander Serena had been shocked to hear how much I was raking in. *I probably shouldn’t talk too much about salary around these guys.*

Eventually, Paul announced, “They’ve finished checking your cargo. Next, we’d like to inspect the ship proper.”

“I’ll join you. Can’t promise I’ll be a good guide though, since again, we only just took delivery.” I proceeded to show Paul’s crew around the ship, leaving the hangar and heading toward the residential wing.

The investigation crew couldn’t remain silent.

“This is a mercenary ship…?”

“Pretty damn fancy.”

“It’s huge. What an extravagant use of space.”

“I wanna live here!”

Paul and his subordinates were losing their minds at the sight of our spacious and beautiful break room, cafeteria, and training room.

One of the soldiers in power armor looked toward the cafeteria and stopped dead. He dropped his laser rifle and fell to his knees.

“Ah… Graaah!”

“What?! What’s wrong?!” The power armored man standing next to him squatted down in concern. *Seriously though, what’s wrong? There’s nothing that shocking here!*

“Look at their auto-cooker!”

“Huh…?” His squatting friend seemed confused. Paul and the other soldiers all glanced toward the cooker.

“That’s the Steel Chef 5…” he said, his voice trembling.

“What the—?!” Another man gasped. *Well, yes, that is the Steel Chef 5.*

“The Steel Chef? What is that?” Paul demanded.

Now slumped over, the fallen soldier answered, “Unlike those crappy cookers that make quote-unquote ‘food,’ this one uses the same food cartridges to make real, high-class meals! It’s the highest-performance cooker on the market!”

Huh. So imperial ships have cheap cookers? I feel like subpar meals would really hurt soldier morale, wouldn’t it?

“But our tea is pretty good, isn’t it?” Paul said.

“I can’t live off of tea and sweets!”

“It’s what the captain wants. Just give up.” He looked away from his pitiful subordinate. I gathered that the cooker on their ship was a sort of super-specialized one that could make good tea and snacks, but not much else. *What, did the Brits make that cooker?*

Tina and Wiska passed through in their work jumpsuits. They greeted the dejected group of soldiers as they went by.

“Oh, soldiers! Thanks for your service, fellas!”

“Thank you for your service.”

“Who were they?” Paul asked as they left.

“They’re a pair of engineers loaned to us by Space Dwergr,” I explained. “As you can see, they’re twin dwarves. Just so you know, they are adults; don’t treat them like children.”

“Engineers? Who pilots this ship, then?”

“We leave it to my high-performance android.” No need to specify that she was a Maidroid.

At that point, however, one soldier realized an inconvenient truth. “Your ship is staffed by women?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“…”

Hey, cut it out! Don’t start swinging those laser rifles around and clenching your fists! I do not want to die getting punched by power armor. It just so happened that almost every one of these soldiers was male. I couldn’t see the faces of three of the people in power armor, but based on their voices, they were male as well.

“Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit! If only I could just meet a woman…!”

“It wouldn’t help,” Paul told him. “Once you’re on duty, you could be on your ship for months or a year. She’d miss you, man.”

“Ha ha!” The man laughed deliriously. “By the time I got home, she’d be with another man…”

“Ouch, dude, that stings,” I said, shuddering. “At least try to get some colony work.” I guided the deflated gaggle of soldiers around the rest of the ship. Finally, we reached the bridge.

“Thank you for your service,” Mei greeted them.

“Are you the android piloting this ship?” Paul demanded.

“Well, yes.”

“She’s a Maidroid,” another man commented.

“Yes. Is that an issue?” Mei cocked her head, betraying no emotion on her face.

“She sure is a Maidroid, but holy cow, she’s a high-quality one.”

“Yes. My master made me to be a bodyguard as well, after all,” Mei explained to the power armor-clad soldiers. There were three of them here, but in a space this cramped, Mei might just be able to beat them. She was a top-tier melee fighter.

“Well that’s the whole ship,” I declared. “Still wanna look around?”

"Yes. We'll have to take a look in the engine room and the like just in case. Some people like to smuggle goods in there, so…"

"Smuggling, huh? See a lot of that around here?"

"We certainly do," Paul replied, heaving a sigh. "Corrupt businessmen will partner with pirates and meet them in empty sectors like this one, purchase loot and contraband from them, and then sell it all in Vlad Prime or take it to other systems. There's no shortage of crime to deal with, and they even seem to have connections with Vlad Prime's outlaws…"

Pirates on the outside, outlaws and dirty businessmen on the inside. It seemed like governing the Vlad System was a real pain. The only way to deal with it would probably be to wipe all the criminals and Abandoned out at once, but that'd be tough. Especially if the really ruthless ones decided to hold major infrastructure points hostage.

Taking over structurally important parts of the colony kept the outlaws safe from violent interference, so long as they lied low enough that the government didn't have a reason to rush in. I felt like it would be smarter in the long run to just deal with the criminals regardless of the potential damage, but I'm sure they had their reasons.

As we discussed their circumstances and the rare pirate appearances in this sector, the soldiers wrapped up their inspection. Paul and his cohorts climbed into their dropship and left us. Of course, they found nothing of note. *Of course.*

I had never been inspected like this, since I had only traveled in one small ship, but we had boosted our carrying capacity thanks to the *Black Lotus*, so we would probably deal with this kind of thing more often. I'd say this one came at the perfect time for a practice run.

"It's getting late, so let's get back to Vlad Prime and dock," I broadcast to the rest of my crew using my terminal. "Tomorrow, we begin in earnest." I had Mei set a course for Vlad Prime. *Tomorrow, we'll really be back in the pirate-killing business.*

Chapter 9:
New Firepower

YESTERDAY'S TRAINING was interrupted by the imperial fleet investigation, but we had at least succeeded in getting used to the ship. Today would mark our return to pirate hunting. Though we'd stumbled into an impromptu shoot-out during the *Krishna*'s test drive, this would be our first time actively searching for pirates in a while.

Tina and Wiska had been in too poor condition to help last time, but this time, we planned it all out the night before. The *Black Lotus*, with the *Krishna* on board, departed from Vlad Prime without issue.

"Let's go with the plan we discussed yesterday," I ordered.

"Understood," Mei responded.

Mimi, Elma, and I stayed on the *Krishna* in the *Black Lotus*'s hangar. Mei was on the bridge of the *Black Lotus*, and Tina and Wiska were on standby in their rooms near the hangar. Keeping them totally in the dark just because they were outsiders would be dangerous, so we allowed them to monitor the status of the *Black Lotus* and *Krishna* to an extent.

"Tina and Wiska," I addressed them. "I don't think we need to worry, but remember: This is a real battle. Brace yourselves."

"Yessir!"

"Yes, Captain."

The girls' tense voices came through our comms.

"And make sure you wear diapers, just in case," I chuckled.

"Ah ha ha! I ain't Wis, so I'll be just fine."

"Sis, please! And you, too!" Wiska blushed madly as she yelled at us for our banter. She seemed less tense, though, and I was glad for that. Mimi was stealing glances at me.

"You've graduated from that, right, Mimi?" I asked.

“O-of course I have. I’ve gotten more than used to this.” A smile crept onto her slightly flushed cheeks. Was she happy that I was worried about her? I didn’t feel like I had been neglecting her lately, exactly, but with the purchase of our new mothership, the *Krishna*’s maintenance, and dealing with our new crew members, we hadn’t had much time together.

Maybe I’ll spoil her a bit after we finish hunting pirates today. And Elma after her. Oh, and Mei, too. Mei might have been a little sneaky with the ship purchase, but as her master, it was important for me to treat her well.

“Departure request completed,” Mei announced. “Exiting now.”

“Got it. Once we’re out, take us to our planned destination.”

“Understood. Leave it to me.”

The *Krishna*’s main screen displayed the data and video feeds taken by the *Black Lotus*’s many sensors. The video showed that we were already out in space, but thanks to the inertial control, we hadn’t felt any movement at all in the *Krishna*. The *Krishna*’s inertial control was truly perfect, except when we were catapulted out of the *Black Lotus*.

Before long, the *Black Lotus* entered faster-than-light travel. We were headed two systems away from the Vlad System.

According to the second lieutenant from yesterday, pirate activity was heating up out here, though in a different system from the one we had visited in the *Krishna*. Once at our destination, we would use the *Black Lotus* in a bait strategy to take them down.

The plan was basically to travel in FTL at a speed comparable to a mining ship and wait for the pirates to intercept us.

“Kinda like fishing, huh?” I mused.

“Yeah,” Elma chuckled. “Fishing for space pirates in an ocean of stars.”

“You really do have a visionary way of thinking,” Mimi added.

I’d say that’s normal for a mercenary, though I suppose most people wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to get intercepted. The only ones who would were crazy pirate-fishing mercenaries like us.

***

Three hours later, we reached our fishing grounds. It only took ten minutes of relatively slow FTL travel for Mei to give us the sign we were waiting for.

"Master, the hyperspace radar is picking something up," Mei declared. "A group is attempting to take up position behind us."

"That was fast. Okay, pretend to run away. Turn toward the closest trading colony, but do it slowly so we look like a heavy transport ship."

"Yes, Master. When they intercept us, I will put up a token resistance to keep up the ruse."

"Fantastic. Girls, we're on standby."

"Okay!" Mimi saluted.

"Gotcha, boss," Elma answered. "Mei, make sure you open the hatch and ready that catapult."

"As you say."

We felt a slight lurch as we prepared for battle. *They must have just intercepted us.*

In that moment, Tina contacted us in a panic. "Hey! Th-they're comin' right up on us! Are we gonna die?!"

"Nope, don't worry. All according to plan. The pirates just took the bait."

"B-bait? W-were y'all using this ship as bait for pirates?!"

"Bingo. The *Black Lotus* has thick shields and plating, so you two will be just fine. Might get fired on a little, though."

"Nononono! They're gonna fire at us?! That's bad! Fire bad!"

"I said you'll be fine! Have some faith in your company; they're the ones who made the ship!" I gave them a cheery thumbs-up; Tina hung up on me. I probably could've said more, but I couldn't baby them forever.

This would be a daily occurrence, so they needed to learn to deal sooner rather than later.

"We are now returning to normal travel via interception," Mei announced dutifully. "Once I have scanned them and confirmed they are pirates, I will launch the *Krishna*. Be prepared."

"Understood."

A few seconds later, the slight rumbling turned into a heavy quake for a mere instant before stopping completely. We were travelling normally again.

"Scan complete. Pirates, eight small craft. Opening hatch and launching."

"Got it. Girls, we're getting right into it once we launch. Mei, attack as soon as the *Krishna* draws their attention."

"Yes, sir!" The three responded at once.

I gripped the controls and flipped the main screen display from the *Black Lotus*'s sensors to the *Krishna*'s. The display came up just in time for us to see the hangar's hatch open.

"Launching the *Krishna* now," Mei said.

The hatch seemed to disappear behind us as powerful g-forces pressed me into my chair. We had been launched at supersonic speed via an electric current sent through the magnetic catapult. The *Krishna* pierced through the airtight shield in an instant and zipped out into space.

As usual, the pirates began to clamor over the open comms.

"A small ship flew out of it!"

"Some kinda guard ship? Weird they didn't fly together."

"It's just one ship. Surround and destroy!"

Ha ha! You guys are excited, huh? Let's see how excited you are to turn into space dust and money in my wallet.

It wasn't that I didn't feel *some* aversion to taking lives, but you can't really afford to feel that way toward pirates. They're guaranteed to kill the people on the ships they steal—or worse, use them for sex or sell their

organs. They'll do that or worse without batting an eye. No benefit and plenty of risk to leaving pirates alive. I didn't give them an inch of mercy.

After exiting the *Black Lotus*, I readied my weapons system and deployed my four heavy laser cannons and two large flak cannons. The pirates had sent five ships after us thinking we were a guard ship, while the other three were trying to waylay the *Black Lotus*.

The five closed in on us. They moved awkwardly, with no sign of a real formation.

"I'm going in," I told the girls.

"Okay. Deploying chaffs." Elma operated subsystems to give me cover. The chaffs didn't totally blind the enemy, but it would muddle the information taken in by their radar gunsights and decrease their accuracy.

I always found myself confused by chaffs in space, but they really did work like they do on Earth. They didn't actually expel metallic foil; instead, they either shot out some material I knew nothing about, or they used some electronic defense method I also knew nothing about. I didn't care about how they worked as long as they reduced enemy accuracy.

"He's coming right at us!" a pirate screamed.

"Brake, brake! We won't survive a head-on collision!"

Obviously aware of their own ships' weak shields and plating, the pirates rushed to get out of the *Krishna*'s way. Ships used to guard transport ships were often solid for protection, so they thought a head-on collision would crush their ships beyond recognition. Surprisingly smart, for pirates.

Naturally, forcing them to expose themselves like this was exactly my plan.

"Aargh—!" Four green rays of light erupted from the heavy laser cannons, crushing the shield of one ship and destroying its plating and hull alike, rendering it inoperable.

It seemed I had managed to strike its mobility and control systems, so the ship was immobile but not fully destroyed. A rare sight, indeed.

Flying past the now-silent pirates, I turned off flight control and used the attitude-control thrusters to make a sharp turn. I then used the main thrusters to circle around the pirates. Even with our inertial control system,

a wave of g-forces assaulted us. Whatever; I was used to it. Thanks to my daily training, the burden of these crazy movements on my body had lessened.

"Ngh!"

"Urk…"

Elma and Mimi groaned in pain, but I couldn't slow my pursuit. I had already swung in behind the pirates, so I wasted no time shooting heavy lasers up their asses.

"What are those movements?! Is he some kind of monster?!"

"Dammit! Don't toy with me!"

By the time I had shot down another of my pursuers, two pirate ships flew in from the side and fired at me. Their lasers were easily stopped by the *Krishna*'s powerful shields. Based on our shield status, they would have to hit me two hundred more times to exhaust them. And Elma would use a shield cell by then, so they would really have to go ham.

“Aaaargh! Get away from me!”

I pivoted the *Krishna* and closed in on the attacking pirates at once. They tried to escape, but the *Krishna* was far faster.

“N-nooo—!” Fire erupted from my two flak cannons at the front, and the ejected shrapnel sliced through one ship’s shields and filled it with holes. I did the same to his buddy. *You’ll get no mercy from me.*

“I-I can’t die here!”

After I shot down the final fleeing ship with my heavy lasers, I looked to the *Black Lotus*, which had been busy fighting off three other ships.

The *Black Lotus*’s many laser cannons must have already disposed of two of them, as there was only one ship fleeing from it now. The *Black Lotus*’s enormous EML was trained on it.

“N-no, I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna—”

“Oh! The last ship is activating FTL…” Mimi began. Harsh light burst from the EML, and in the blink of an eye, the final pirate had been blown to smithereens. *Oof, that’s rough.* “…Never mind. He didn’t make it.”

“Sure looks like it. That’s the end of this battle. Let’s salvage whatever we haven’t shot to pieces.”

Thanks to the *Black Lotus*, we could bring home equipment and less-damaged pirate ships that we’d had no way to transport before. Our profits from selling loot would go way up. It was especially lovely that we could take the slightly-less-obliterated pirate ships to sell.

Captured pirate ships were worthless to mercenaries who needed real fighting power, but they were valuable as small transport ships for up-and-coming interstellar traders, miners, and scavengers. If we could bring one back, it would be one of the most profitable pieces of loot.

“Heh heh heh,” I laughed evilly, imagining the profits. “I’ll have to be more careful not to destroy their ships from now on.”

“I don’t like that look on your face…” Mimi shuddered.

“Don’t bother with him,” Elma groaned. “Mei, we’ll leave the big ones to you. Hiro, wake up! It’s time to grab the loot!”

“Understood.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I scanned the storage containers as I flew closer to the pirate ship carcasses. *Maaan, I can’t wait to see our earnings today!*

***

“Hey, hon. Reckon you could grab that ship’s FTL drive for us?” Tina called while we were recovering our spoils.

“Just so you know, recovery drones can’t grab internal parts,” I warned her. “External parts like weapons are all they’re good for.”

“I know, but if you can toss the whole ship in here, we can yank out whatever we like.”

“Won’t that take a while?”

“Don’t worry your little head. We’ve got plenty of maintenance bots, and if you don’t care what happens to the ship, we’ll be done before ya know it.”

“Hmm…” I looked to Elma for her opinion.

“Just let them do it. That’ll give us an idea of the return on investment.”

“True. Okay, girls, give it a try. Mei, use the tractor beam to guide the ship.”

“Understood.”

“Tina and Wiska,” I continued, “you’ll get a bonus based on how well you do. Good luck. Though I won’t know what percentage of profits you’ll earn until I can consult the mercenary guild.”

“You got it, hon!”

“We’ll do our best!”

The two nodded vigorously. At the same time, a green beam shot from the *Black Lotus* to the last somewhat intact pirate ship. It made contact and slowly drew the pirate ship toward us.

That green beam was actually just the guide laser; the tractor beam itself was invisible. *Also, where's the whurrrrrrr noise? That's the most important part!*

"Oh, but be careful," I warned. "There might be survivors inside."

"Yes," Mei affirmed. "What shall I do if we discover any?"

"Deal with them as you like. Don't hold back."

"Understood, Master." She replied flatly through the speaker. Mei of all people would definitely deal with them as she liked.

That might've been going too far against people who can't fight back, but I didn't care. Pirates are already the worst of the worst, people who'd killed plenty of innocents without remorse. They were the ones who wanted our lives and cargo. I couldn't think of a single reason to treat them with mercy. Anyway, back to looting!

"They have an awful lot of food and alcohol," Mimi noted.

Elma shrugged. "Pirate liquor is all cheap crap; they only care about quantity, not quality. I'll pass."

"Well, every little bit helps. Oh!" I gasped. "They've got refined metal."

Now that we had a mothership with plenty of cargo space, we didn't have to prioritize expensive loot and leave the majority behind. This was much better for my mental health.

Mimi had always spent a lot of time comparing recent sale prices for each item at the nearest colony. This was my first time seeing her all smiles as she grabbed everything she could. Back when she first started helping with the recovery drones, she was just focused on getting it right. Now that she was used to it, she was more focused on sales data.

Pirate cargo was mostly made up of consumable goods, but they occasionally had loot. There was often a lot on board if they had just finished a raid, but they were usually on their way to sell the stuff at that

point, so they wouldn't actively attack. It was rare to run into them with a full hold.

Sometimes, though, you could find good stuff even when they hadn't just done their dirty work. Stuff like high-value Rare Metal, refined metals, and the like. They were basically savings—a nest egg. You could find pirates like that on occasion, so it was important not to slack on your salvaging.

"Nice. Our cargo's full, so let's take it to the *Black Lotus*," I ordered.

"Yes, sir!" Mimi gave me a big smile. *Heh, I get it. Looting is always fun.*

***

After a few more trips between the pirate ships and the *Black Lotus*, we had finished collecting our spoils, docked on the *Black Lotus*, and decided to enjoy a nice little break. I sipped from my stupidly high-tech drink bottle and watched the mechanic twins work from within the *Krishna*.

"They use those maintenance bots well," I mused.

"That's mechanics for you," Elma said. "With a bit of effort, I bet they could learn to use battle bots."

"Do you think so?"

"Mechanics are always good drone operators. If those two leave Space Dwergr to work with us, it might be good to hire them as maintenance-slash-drone operators."

Maintenance personnel worked with their own hands to maintain big spaceships, but there's a limit to what people can do. Lifting spaceships is difficult even in low gravity, and it's dangerous at that. As such, they used maintenance bots to assist with their work.

Typically, mechanics each control two to three maintenance bots. Our hangar currently had ten bots working in it, though; I guess the twins were skilled enough to each use five at a time.

"Pretty crazy how they can control ten at once, huh?" I asked.

“Yeah. Though it’s not exactly precise work,” Elma answered with a shrug.

We watched as Tina and Wiska worked with practiced motions on our holo-display. They looked like they were chatting as they worked, but their ten bots still worked with smooth efficiency, as if their multitasking didn’t hurt their work at all.

Hmm. Mei did say they were excellent engineers, but it’s still incredible to watch them work. My estimation of them was definitely improving.

The maintenance pods used laser tools to carve up the tattered pirate ship. I loved those laser things. They were like lightsabers! *I’d probably stab myself in the foot or something since I can’t use the Force.*

Lightsabers are any man’s true dream. I didn’t mind the swords Count Dalenwald gave me, but I couldn’t just walk around with one of those at my hip. I didn’t wanna be mistaken for nobility, and plus, when would I ever get the chance to use it?

While the three of us watched the girls doing their thing, Mei contacted us. “Master.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Dessert has arrived,” she said as alerts from our hyperspace sensors lit up our screen. *Dessert, eh? Hook, line, and sinker.*

“Awesome,” I smirked. “Girls, we’ve got one more job to do.”

“Okay!”

“Aye aye.”

It was time to strike before the enemies warped out.

***

“Boy, am I beat!”

“We certainly worked hard, Sis.”

Another order of dessert had come our way. In the end, we defeated three waves of enemies before returning to Vlad Prime. Since we had arrived back just in time for rush hour, we were stuck in line waiting to dock.

In the end, we had destroyed twenty-seven small craft and two medium, for a total of twenty-nine ships. Their bounties totaled to 217,500 Ener. That was quite a lot in itself, but we also had a small ship in good condition inside our hangar *and* a medium ship towed behind the *Black Lotus*.

We had brought the medium one by using parts from one of the destroyed ships to fix the FTL drive of the other. The small one stowed in the hangar had also been constructed by picking a craft with a relatively undamaged frame, yanking parts out of other ships, and Frankensteining it into a good-enough ship.

We had also filled the *Black Lotus*'s entire cargo space with loot and other items from the pirates, along with parts we had stripped from their ships. How much would all this sell for? Based on my time spent in *Stella Online*, I guessed that the small ship would sell for about thirty thousand, and the medium one would sell for seventy.

The other loot was too much of a hodgepodge for me to come up with an estimate, but I doubted it would go for under eighty thousand.

The space around the colony was devoid of danger, so after warping out near Vlad Prime, we got off the *Krishna* and met up with the mechanic twins to relax in the break room.

"Let's have a party to celebrate today," I proposed. "We can eat out, or we can use our personal chef. Thoughts?"

Of course, the personal chef I was referring to would be our high-performance automatic cooker, the Steel Chef 5. If we used high-quality cartridges instead of normal ones, the food would be even better than most restaurants. That would also leave us free to drink whatever we wanted, since we would be in private.

You had to consider how you'd get home when you go to a restaurant, so you couldn't get blackout drunk. I didn't care since I wasn't a

drinker, but the four of us who were would be too much for me to handle alone. Maybe two, but not four.

"Why don't we stay on the ship?" Elma proposed. "I could break out my *good* liquor."

"Liquor!" Tina screamed.

"Oh… Sis, we can drink now, can't we?!"

"Yeah! Hear that, hon?!" Tina looked at me with an expectant glint in her eyes.

I smiled. "Mimi, figure out what they like and order some for them."

"Aye aye, Captain."

The twins jumped for joy. They looked like girls in their early teens, so it was weird to see them get so excited at the prospect of getting drunk.

"Dwarven drinks, huh?" Elma mused. "I probably wouldn't drink them, given how strong they are."

"Dwarven drinks ain't just strong; what people really buy 'em for is their sharp taste. Kiraku Ale Co.'s Grand Ring, for example, is cheap but tastes good as hell."

Wiska nodded along with Tina's explanation. It seemed these twins were alike in their love for strong drinks.

"Master, we've been given permission to dock," Mei informed me.

"Fantastic; do just that. Be careful, and good luck," I responded through the break room speaker.

"Yes. Leave it to me."

I watched as all the girls gathered around Mimi's tablet. A smile crept onto my face. They really were going to get along well.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Elma and Tina tried their best to splurge on expensive alcohol, while Mimi and Wiska tried desperately to stop—*hey, wait a second. That's my money they're splurging with! Okay, okay, I should stop them. Damn drunks!*

***

The day after our little party in the *Black Lotus*'s cafeteria, Mimi and I visited the mercenary guild on Vlad Prime. Elma was still asleep since she drank until dawn, and Mei was on a nice walk with Tina and Wiska to collect our bounties from the imperial fleet's office.

"A bonus for your engineers, correct? There does seem to be a conventional rate. In this case… Hmm, so the two are loaned employees from a corporation? And the ship is owned solely by you."

The pretty-boy receptionist at the guild confirmed their data on me and my crew on his tablet while typing something into the console of his holo-display. *Damn, this guy's looking at two screens* and *using both one-handed? That's some skill.*

He continued, "Loaned employees are less common, so there isn't much precedent. Typically, their salaries are paid by their company, so it's rare for the captain to pay any percentage of rewards to them."

"Uh-huh…?"

"However, many engineers become frustrated by the mismatch between their pay and the high-risk environment, so most leave their companies within three months of being loaned."

"But only most? Not one hundred percent." Honestly, I'd never agree to getting 3,700 Ener a month for being on a ship with mercenaries, though I'm only speaking from my own experience.

"Yes. Some die before they have the opportunity to leave, after all."

"Oh. That's rough."

"They are rare cases, however. Firms typically take great care in loaning them out… Okay, there we go. In many cases, captains either pay them a fixed bonus regardless of results, or ten to twenty percent of ship and salvage sales that are a direct result of the engineers' work."

"Jeez, all this math is a pain in the ass." Figuring out which sales the girls were involved in, how much we made from them, and twenty percent of that… I'd hate to calculate all of that every time. *It is annoying, but I guess it's not a big deal. Still annoying, though.*

“Many resort to fixed bonuses for that very reason,” the man responded.

“I get that.” But I’d have to know the exact sale prices before I decided. “Okay, I think that makes sense. I’ll talk it over with the crew. Now, there’s one more thing I need.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“You probably saw this in my data, but we just bought a new mothership. We wanted to pick up some light courier work. The mercenary guild takes care of mediation with the merchant guild, right?”

“Yes, we can absolutely do that.”

The mercenary and merchant guilds got along very well. After all, sectors of space overrun by pirates and space monsters were dangerous. Merchants needed mercenaries to protect them, and mercenaries loved the business they brought. I made my money from killing space pirates, but many mercs put food on the table by guarding merchants.

My fighting style was basically grandstanding. I specialized in zooming around alone and shooting things, which didn’t really work well for protecting people. Not to say that I couldn’t if I needed to, though.

“A Skithblathnir mothership…” the receptionist said to himself. “That has quite the carrying capacity.”

“We’ll carry up to a limit of 180 tons to maintain some breathing room. Gotta have room for our necessities, after all.” The *Black Lotus*’s capacity wasn’t comparable to that of a large transport ship, but 180 tons was still plenty of room. It was definitely good money for three to five people to make in their spare time.

“It is much faster than the average merchant’s large transport ship,” he said. “If you keep hunting pirates as you did today, you’ll be known for your security as well. There may be demand for deliveries that require speed and security. Your furnishings are…very luxurious, as well.”

“Yeah, we sunk a fair bit of money into that.”

“Perhaps you could carry merchants along with their goods. Your passenger rooms seem to be furnished, so adding that as another positive to your résumé could bring you some good work.”

“Just don’t give me anyone too arrogant, or there might be an ‘accident,’” I warned him. “I’ve got women on my ship, so I don’t want any funny business.”

“I see. We’ll be as careful as possible in that regard.” The pretty boy responded with a big smile, but I noticed a flash of naked jealousy on his face.

Mimi was with me, and of course she was hot; the guy probably saw Elma’s profile on his little tablet, too. But the receptionist was good-looking, and he probably made a decent salary, so I had to assume he was popular with the ladies. Not that I’d say that out loud, of course. He might have had some other issues.

“We plan to use the Vlad System as a base for getting used to the new ship while pirate hunting, but we will leave earlier if our loot sells faster,” I added. “Let the merchant guild know that.”

“Understood. We’ll contact you at once if there’s any progress.”

“We’d appreciate it.” After thanking the employee, we left the guild.

Once we were back on the street, Mimi, who had been silent the whole time, finally opened her mouth. “So we can finally start doing work other than hunting pirates!” She wrung her hands excitedly. Mimi had always been interested in the specialized and rare goods of various colonies. I guess she had been looking into that stuff while she sold pirate loot for us.

“Can I leave it to you, Mimi? Elma doesn’t seem interested in that stuff, and Mei will be busy looking after the *Black Lotus* and the twins.”

“I’m sure Mei could handle it better…” she said bashfully.

“But we can’t have Mei carry us all the time. Besides, isn’t that boring?” In all honesty, Mei could probably manage our entire crew and everything involving both ships all at once if used to her full potential. We could let our brains rot and do nothing but listen to her orders.

“Right,” Mimi agreed. “I would feel guilty for pushing it on her, too.”

“Same here. I mean, something like that almost destroyed this empire once.” I had learned a fair bit of history during my time in this universe. This galactic empire, the Grakkan Empire, had once faced annihilation in a war with machine intelligence.

I didn't know all the details, but before that war, the Grakkan Empire was essentially in the golden age of machine intelligence. They had built a society wholly reliant on its aid. And like in any sci-fi story, there was an AI uprising that led to a massive war. After a whole lot of twists and turns, they negotiated peace with the machine intelligence. Ever since, the people tended to shy away from totally relying on machines again.

That said, I felt like the current Grakkan Empire was still pretty darn reliant on machine intelligence. They may have appeared to have found a peaceful balance with humanity in charge and machines supporting them, but I think it's more like the humans were being controlled by the machines. Again, I couldn't be certain about it, but it felt like the machines were pulling the strings from the shadows.

That said, they didn't seem to have bad intentions. Maybe it was more like a powerful force watching over you in secret. *Meh, I'm sure I'm just imagining it. Besides, it wouldn't hurt me if that's how it was, anyway. Who cares?*

"The war with machines, yes?" Mimi asked. "Did you know that there are a lot of theories about how it ended, including some urban legends?"

"Really? Do you know any?"

Mimi and I headed back to the *Black Lotus*, talking about the past along the way. Mimi's urban legends were pretty funny, though I did have some complaints. I was *not* into the story about the infantryman who fell in love with a battleship's Sexdroid AI, thereby teaching it what love was and ending the war. That just sounded like too much of a weird, dirty joke.

***

When we returned to the *Black Lotus*, we found Elma resting in the break room.

"We're back."

"Heya." She was awfully comfortable, given that Mimi, Mei, and I were all out doing work.

“Gee, thanks for all your help,” I said.

“How’d it go?”

“Not sure until we know how much we got for the haul,” I replied. “But we think ten to twenty percent of what we made thanks to the twins would be a good payment.”

“Cool. Hmm…” Elma looked at her tablet. “Yep, it looks like we found a buyer for the parts they pulled out of those ships.”

“Wow, really?”

“That was fast,” Mimi chimed in.

“Yep. See?” Elma handed me her tablet, and I sat next to her. Mimi sat beside me, and we all looked at the screen.

“That’s…more than I expected.”

“Right? I was shocked, too.”

The price displayed was much higher than I had guessed. The ship they had Frankensteined together had sold for 55,000 Ener. The medium ship equipped with FTL drive and all other necessary parts had sold for 90,000 Ener. All of the spare weapons and parts we had stripped off the pirate ships added up to a total of 130,000.

“So that makes…about 275,000 Ener total?” My eyes went wide. “That’s even more than we made from bounties.”

“That’s incredible,” Mimi agreed.

“Yup. Don’t underestimate free parts. This’ll be a secure stream of income, even when the pirates we kill have crappy bounties.”

“Very cool.”

“Oh,” Elma added. “We got buyers for the assorted cargo, too. That adds up to around 15,000 Ener.”

“That’s also more than expected.”

“We did have lots of refined metal and Rare Metal, after all,” Mimi reminded us.

So, 217,500 Ener on bounties, 275,000 on sold pirate ships and equipment, and 15,000 worth of loot. That made…642,500 Ener total? Up

till now, bounties and carefully selected loot had only added up to about half of that, so our revenue had essentially doubled.

"What are you gonna do for their rewards?" Elma asked me.

"I was thinking ten percent of the proceeds of their work should suffice," I answered. "How about you?"

"I feel like a flat ten thousand is fine, but it *does* feel a little cheap for risking your life. Might as well do it your way, right?"

"I-I think so, too," Mimi chimed in.

"Ten percent of the ships and the equipment they yanked out, then. That would be 27,500 Ener, which leaves us with 615,000. Mimi gets 6,150, and Elma gets 18,450. Are we sure we want the newbies making more money than Mimi?" Something felt wrong about it on an emotional level.

"That's normal; those two are highly skilled specialists," Elma countered. "Mimi's doing good work as an operator, but we still can't let her go to a colony alone. To get to the next step, she'll have to be able to protect herself. To be a truly great operator, she has to be able to go on colonies alone without us worrying about her."

"I-I'll do my best…"

Elma was a tough customer. As for her, she was doing perfect work as co-pilot, and she could go out alone on colonies to do any work we needed. If she wanted, she could work as a better operator than Mimi, too, and she had the background knowledge to sell loot as well. It made sense, of course—she had been a captain at one point, and she had the skills to show for it.

"Well 27,500 Ener between them makes 13,750 each," I said. My cut was 590,400 Ener. Was I making too much? No way. The ship was a hundred percent mine, and I was the captain and owner, so my cut was normal. I paid everyone's living expenses, anyway.

"So I barely made more, huh? If you wanna be nice, you *could* raise my reward, too." Elma snuggled up against me flirtatiously.

"Ask me again when you've even begun paying off your debt."

"Aww, should I?"

“Well…I’m not in that much of a hurry.”

“Didn’t think so.” Elma grinned with glee.

Damn you! I’m still not raising your pay! I thought to myself. Mimi clung to my arm. *Why do I feel like she’s pouting?*

“Mimi?”

“Don’t mind me.”

Since she never missed a day of training, Mimi was constantly getting stronger. At this point, she was quite a bit stronger than the average adult woman. My adjustments to her training program had suppressed her growth quite a bit, but her strength was still increasing. What I’m trying to say is, she was actually hurting my arm. The softness pressing against me more than made up for it, though. *Thank you, God.*

“Mimi, you’re being unfair.”

“I can’t beat you otherwise.”

Mimi and Elma were arguing on either side of me, but I couldn’t hear them; I was too busy focusing on the feeling of them against me. Or more like I was trying not to hear them.

“Ack! Look, they’re flirting!”

“Sis…”

That loud voice was familiar. It seemed Mei and the mechanic twins had returned. I looked over to see Tina running in, and Wiska trying to keep up behind her. Mei was looking down at me, as well. And thanks to Tina’s yelling, it seemed our little moment had ended. *Shame…*

I put out both hands to welcome Tina. She gasped.

With stars in her eyes, she sprinted over and jumped into my arms. She hit me pretty hard, but my body was sturdy enough that it didn’t hurt.

“Aww. There, there.” I went with the flow and patted her head.

“Purr…meooow…”

Why are you a cat now? Come to think of it, I had never seen pets in this universe. Did people keep pets? I had seen not a single cat in the

colonies, but based on Tina's noises, I could assume that cats or some similar creatures were kept as pets *somewhere* out there.

Mimi and Elma both stared at me in silence.

"Ulp…" Wiska went pale, her hands trembling and tears building up in her eyes.

I innocently stroked Tina's hair, ignoring the glares stabbing into me from all sides. Stubbornly, obstinately ignoring. Wiska looked almost terrified enough to wet herself, yet I pretended not to see it. I also pretended not to see Mei staring directly at us. *I do not see it*.

"Okay, that's enough," I decided. "Done! Disperse!"

"We're not actually going to disperse, though."

"True."

Mimi and Elma sounded pricklier than usual. *No need to get so mad, girls. It's not my fault Tina's too cute to ignore.*

"Oh, right," I remembered. "We sold the stuff you girls ripped out of those ships. It was 275,000 Ener total."

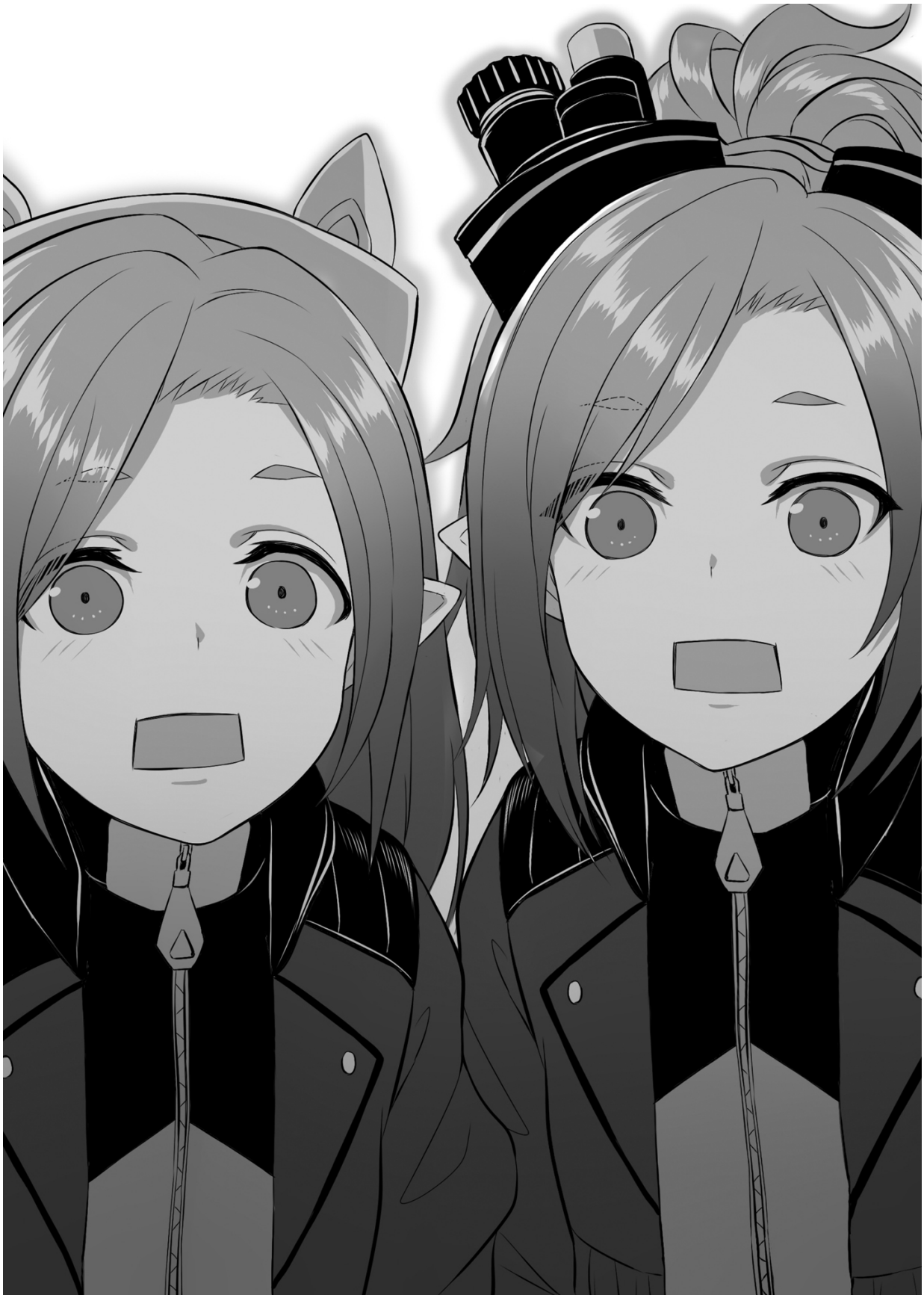
"Whoa. Didn't think y'all would get that much!"

"We were surprised, too. I talked about it with the mercenary guild, and we decided to give you ten percent of the proceeds on the ships you helped us sell, along with the stuff you ripped out of the others."

"Ten percent?"

"Yeah, ten percent. Your total bonus this round is 27,500 Ener. If you split it evenly, that's 13,750 for each of you."

"13,750…?" Tina cocked her head, as if she didn't understand. I could almost see question marks floating over her head. I glanced at Wiska, and she was making the very same face.



“Our actual income will be different each time, but if we can keep selling ships and parts, you’ll keep getting the same percentage.”

“Bwuh?” Tina’s mind had short-circuited. She was frozen in place, looking up at me from chest height. *Rather than short-circuiting, maybe it’s a full-on shut down?*

“Am I dreamin’, or what?” It wasn’t clear what was going through her mind, but Tina blissfully buried her face into my chest. She looked like she was going to sleep.

“No, this is real life. It’s not so bad that you have to try to escape reality, right?”

“Hon…one day of scrapping together two ships and yanking crap out of others got us four times what we’d make in a month of real work. ’Course it’s bad.”

“Heh. Yeah, I guess that is a tough realization.”

“Why’d I bust my ass all my life?” Tina groused, face still buried in my chest. She was pressed right up against me, but all I could think was that she was pitifully flat. Mimi and Elma were clearly uneasy, as if they didn’t like Tina coming right up and hugging me. Or maybe they were just jealous?

Meanwhile, Mei had taken the frozen Wiska to lie down on another couch. Was it that much of a shock?

***

Elma and Mimi peeled Tina off of me, demanded hugs for themselves for some reason, and snapped Wiska back to her senses. It was a hell of a commotion for a while, but eventually, everyone had settled down at the break room table. Wiska still looked a little off, but she was able to answer questions, so she was fine. Right? I hoped so.

“Any normal person would react the same way,” Mimi declared.

“For real,” Tina agreed. “If y’all are making this much money, I can see why this guy here acts like he doesn’t know the value of an Ener.”

“Is my sense of value that skewed…?” I hadn’t thought so, but Tina and Mimi seemed to disagree. *Really, I don’t think I’ve wasted money at any point.*

“I don’t think so,” Elma said, siding with me. “He’s generous, but I don’t think he’s wasted any money.”

“Same,” I added.

“Nuh-uh. Y’all got some screws loose,” Tina said, shaking her head.

“They do!” Mimi vigorously agreed. “I’ve started to think I’m getting messed up recently, too.”

Huh? Really?

“We’ve got different standards,” Tina explained. “We base our day-to-day food and living expenses on our monthly salary. Y’all base yours on the price of a new ship or equipment. I bet y’all only start to think something is ‘kinda expensive’ if it’s a million Ener. You think ten thousand is pocket change too, right? I bet I’m right.”

“Ten thousand is a lot, isn’t it?!” Mimi nodded.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Uhh…” I struggled for a response. Ten thousand Ener could easily be spent in one go on repairs and resupplying. I rarely had to pay for repairs since I fought carefully to avoid hull damage, but if our ship was somehow grievously damaged, it would cost hundreds of thousands of Ener to repair. Ten thousand was like nothing.

“The fact that *that’s* your answer is proof you’re too rich to think straight!” Tina protested.

“You could spend that much in one sitting at a nice restaurant!” I replied.

“Only at a super-fancy one with real meat and veggies. At normal restaurants, you can fill your belly for five Ener.”

Actually, that might be true.

“A whole box of standard-grade food cartridges only costs a hundred Ener, too,” Mimi said.

“Thirty meals per box, so three Ener a meal. That makes three hundred Ener the minimum food expenses for one person to live for a month. Add in air, water, and other essentials, and a colonist can live off a thousand Ener a month. We were making 3,700, so we were kinda living in luxury.”

Wiska nodded as Tina spoke. The two didn’t exactly look emaciated when we first met; they weren’t suffering at all financially. *Huh, so my sense of money* is *all messed up. Guess it’s too late for me to realize it, since Mimi’s been saying it all along.*

“Ah, whatever,” I shrugged. “I’m just scaling up expenses to match revenue. That’s all.”

“You’re not wrong,” Elma chimed in. “You’re doing just fine; nobody can criticize your income.”

“Also, now that you’re with us, you two are gonna have to learn our ways. Surrender now,” I demanded.

“Okay.”

“Fiiine…”

“…I’ll do my best.” Perhaps realizing it was too late, Mimi solemnly acquiesced. It seemed like she just wanted me to admit once and for all that I had a warped sense of value.

“I am glad that you were able to resolve your differences peacefully,” Mei said with a strange satisfaction as she watched from beside the table. *I wonder how she feels about the matter.*

“What are your thoughts, Mei?” I asked.

“Oh, me? I have no issues with your economic philosophy, Master.”

“Huh. I’m a little surprised.” Again, I didn’t see myself as wasting money, but I also didn’t think my expenses were a hundred percent pristine.

“Yes. You seem weak to aggressive salesmen, but there are no particular issues yet. You seem self-aware of that, too. Besides, you earned the assets needed to buy the *Black Lotus* yourself, so there’s nothing to worry about at all.”

“I see.” If my sense of value was *that* far gone, then I never would’ve been able to afford this mothership. I was making money hand over fist, so we wouldn’t run into trouble any time soon. “Okay, that settles this dispute. So, I talked with the mercenary guild…”

I put the topic of money aside and brought up the limited courier work I had talked about with the guild. We still needed a lot of money, both for my goal and for everyone’s eternal happiness. It would be more productive for all of us if we covered everything from past to future.

Epilogue

AFTER SELLING OUR SPOILS and the captured ships, we prepared to depart. Just then, there was a courier request from the mercenary guild.

"Can't believe they sent us a request already—it's only been a day," I said with a chuckle.

"We should definitely thank them for being so fast," Mimi replied.

The request came during our post-exercise-and-shower breakfast, so everyone was present in the cafeteria. The maintenance sisters had joined our training, and they ate with us as well.

"No rest for the weary, huh?" Tina mused. "I didn't think y'all would work like this."

"I know how you feel!" Mimi agreed. "When I first got here, I was surprised we were working so diligently right away."

"Really?" I asked. The word *diligent* seemed strange to me; it wasn't like we were busting our butts every day. We often took a day or two off; it didn't feel very diligent at all.

"You imagined taking a week or a month off after each job, right?" Elma said.

"Yeah! I reckoned it'd be just like that."

"I actually did, too."

The twins agreed, and Mimi nodded along.

"You can't make much money if you go on vacation every time you do a single day of work. How do you even upgrade your weapons?" I asked.

"But lots of mercs live like that," Elma said with a shrug. "Do a big job, spend all your money in one go, and it's back to work again."

"Yeah, yeah!" Tina added. "That's what we thought!"

"Compared to them, you really are diligent, Hiro. You save your money, and you don't have any pointless expenses."

“You think so? Well, I guess that’s not a bad thing.”

“Not at all!” Wiska agreed.

I felt like I had been spending pretty lavishly between buying Mei, getting swanky furnishings for the *Black Lotus*, and buying the chameleon mantles. Still, I wasn’t used to the customs of this universe, so it was totally possible that I just hadn’t run into many major expenses beyond ships.

More importantly…

“As long as I’m paying for our necessities, I’m not planning on spending wildly.” Besides, I had goals. I wanted to buy a nice detached home with a yard on some planet and shower myself in delicious carbonated beverages. That was my ambition.

“You’re a pretty upstanding guy,” Tina mused. “What made ya become a merc?”

“Thrills and excitement?” I shrugged.

“Why did you say that like a question…?” Wiska worried too much about the little things. I wasn’t going to tell the twins about my special circumstances just yet, so I brushed it off.

“Anyway, let’s talk about work. Mei?”

“Yes.” Mei brought up the request on the cafeteria’s holo-display. As usual, she followed me like a shadow, not participating in our conversations but listening and ready to serve at any moment. She had quite the presence, though, so maybe calling her a shadow wasn’t quite accurate.

“This is the request sent to us from the merchant guild via the mercenary guild,” she explained. “The mission is to deliver about 120 tons of goods to an imperial fleet outpost nine systems away, in the Izulux System.”

“We’re delivering goods to one of the fleet’s frontline outposts?”

“Huh…?”

Elma and I cocked our heads, puzzled. Mimi and the mechanic twins were confused by our confusion. They say doubt begets doubt, and we were in a spiral of question marks.

“Is that unusual?” Mimi asked. Elma and I looked to each other.

“I mean, it’s a frontline outpost,” I repeated.

“It’s unheard of for the fleet to mess up their supply lines so badly that they need to rely on private couriers for rush shipping,” Elma said. “And 120 tons? That’s not a small amount, but it seems like nothing compared to the goods they handle on a daily basis.”

“What’s throwing us is that we got a military request instead of what we expected: a private request. Any of the cruisers in the Vlad System could carry 120 tons. I don’t see why they’d rely on us, of all people.”

“Huh. Yeah, that is kinda weird…”

Now seeing the issue, the mechanic twins cocked their heads anew. Mimi seemed to understand now, as well.

“What purpose does that outpost serve, anyway?” I asked. “Does the Izulux System border the Belbellum Federation?”

The Belbellum Federation was one faction antagonistic to the Grakkan Empire, where we resided. Once upon a time, I had fought them as a mercenary hired by the Grakkan Empire.

“No, it’s actually a frontier system,” Mei answered. “It is part of the front line against the crystal life-forms.”

“Oh…crystal life-forms, huh?”

“S-space monsters?”

At the words “crystal life-forms,” Tina turned pale and Wiska recoiled in fear. They were just as their name implied: silicon-based hostile organisms that roamed the universe. As we had no way of communicating with them, they were counted among the creatures known as “space monsters.”

The crystal life-forms made nests on planets and asteroids uninhabitable by people. Whenever they encountered any species other than themselves, they attacked with high-pressure energy missiles and lasers, and used their considerable mass to ram into and destroy ships.

They appeared to hold some sort of grudge against organic life, and attempted to kill organics on sight. Research into crystal life-forms was progressing, but it wasn’t going well. For now, they remained both troublesome and mysterious.

Mei continued, “The contents appear be experimental weapons effective against crystal life-forms. They want them delivered quickly for field testing.”

“That really sounds like a military job,” I said.

“We are faster and have less red tape to get through. If you would prefer not to take this job, I am able to refuse the request.”

“Nah, that’s not it. What do you think, Elma?”

“A military request probably won’t come back to bite us. Besides, the reward isn’t bad. Why not, right?”

“I think it’s a good idea, too,” Mimi chimed in. “What if we filled the remaining sixty tons with dwarven ale and other luxury goods? I hear their alcohol exports are popular.”

“Not a bad idea, that.” Luxury goods were in high demand at military outposts. They might refuse to buy from us if they had some legal limitations, but we could always sell them elsewhere.

“Mimi gets it! Everyone loves a dwarven drink.”

“They really do,” Wiska added. “Our colony is famous for manufacturing, but merchants from all over come in search of artisan goods and alcohol made by dwarves.” Our resident locals backed up Mimi’s proposal, then.

I looked to Mei just in case, and she agreed as well. “I believe it’s a good decision.”

“Then let’s leave the rest of our cargo space to Mimi. From now on, I think I’ll let you handle that stuff.”

“Okay—wait, what?!” The energetic smile on Mimi’s face froze. Suddenly she was sweating bullets. *What? Did I say something weird?*

“Mimi’s just shocked because she didn’t expect that big of a responsibility,” Elma smirked.

“Is it that big?” I asked.

“Of course it is. It means she’ll be buying goods with your money and trying to turn a profit for you.”

"Yeah?" I raised an eyebrow. "I know that already." *Is that a problem?*

"Mimi isn't a professional trader, so she'll probably lose money sometimes."

"Yeah, maybe."

"That means she'll be losing *your* money at times," Elma pointed out.

"Yes. Ah, and that's the responsibility, right? I don't really care if she loses a little." Losing tens of thousands or even a hundred thousand Ener would be a problem, but sixty tons of cargo couldn't possibly lead to that. If we couldn't sell it at our destination this time, we could just take it to a rich colony and sell it there.

"…I guess that's just the kind of guy you are." Elma heaved a sigh.

"Take it easy, Mimi," I told her. "Really. Buying a colony's local products or cheap surplus items won't lead to much loss, if any. If we can't find a good price in one place, then we can sell it elsewhere. I won't get mad even if there are small losses, and if you make a lot of money, you'll get a hefty bonus. I don't care if it's just a tiny profit, either. I don't mind a day of free docking or some essential items. It's just a side gig to earn some spare change, okay?"

"You have an interesting definition of spare change…" Wiska shuddered.

"Yeah, no kiddin'…"

The mechanic twins were horrified.

"So there you have it. Good luck."

"Y-yes sir…" Mimi looked ready to die, but she'd get used to it sooner or later. *Worry not, babe.*

"Don't panic too much. Mei will be there helping you out, too."

"Yes, be at ease. I am glad to help." With some luck, Mei would turn Mimi into a first-class merchant. As she gained experience, her salary would continue to grow and grow. *Between her daily duties, self-defense training, and managing commerce, I'd better keep an eye out to make sure*

Mimi doesn't overexert herself. She's a serious one, so she's likely push herself too far.

"I'll help, too," Elma offered. "You'll be just fine."

"O-okay. Mei and Elma, thank you for this."

"Of course."

"No prob."

"I'll leave it up to you and enjoy my passive income," I said smugly.

"Shameless." Elma shook her head.

"I could do it myself, but it's a captain's job to give his crew work." I had done some trading in *SOL* for extra income, so I could do it well if absolutely necessary. After all, I already had a sense of what sorts of goods were cheap in each system and what would be scarce. "You have my money at your disposal, so buy whatever you see fit. A bit of advice: Don't take too much cheap beer to a military joint. You want mostly mid-range options and ten or twenty percent really ritzy stuff."

Thanks to their higher incomes, soldiers preferred the mid-range stuff over stuff that you could drink just to get wasted. High-class goods would sell to higher-ranking officers, too. On the other hand, mining colonies and stations often preferred quantity over quality.

"U-understood."

"Mei, let them know we're accepting the request," I directed. "Sorry to trouble you, but I'll also need you to help Mimi."

"As you say, Master."

"How 'bout us?" Tina asked.

"No orders for you girls right now. But we'll be leaving the colony, so if you have any loose ends, tie them up now. We don't know when we'll be come back."

"Aye aye, Captain," Wiska answered with a salute.

"I'll get ready to launch."

"Thanks, Elma. I'll check our equipment again and confirm our route. Okay, everyone, hop to it!" On my orders, everyone began their

work.

It was time to say farewell to the Vlad System. I was worried we'd run into Serena like we usually do, but it seemed taking the gateway had put enough distance between us and her.

But if I let my guard down, I was sure I'd run into her sooner or later. It wasn't like she was intentionally hounding me, but after three encounters, you start to expect a fourth. Our destination being a military outpost made me begin to wonder, but surely Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit wouldn't be hanging around an outpost for stopping the advance of crystal life-forms.

Right? Surely not, right? Right…?

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR READING *Reborn as a Space Mercenary* Volume 5! Woo, we did it! Hi, I'm Ryuto!

Mimi and Elma are adorable in the manga, and it's selling great! Go buy it. I'm serious.

Let's get straight to the "what's going on in my life" section.

I broke my poor, beloved glasses and bought a new pair. I'm very nearsighted, so I can't live without them. Hell, I can't even game! I can't be a gamer without my glasses!

Lately, I've been playing a certain popular game where you raise horses, a certain Viking survival game, and more. I also tried playing a popular sandbox zombie game with mods, along with a space management game that *looks* like a flight sim, which recently released its human faction DLC.

Switch? PS5? Never heard of 'em.

Anyway, that's enough about games I've played. Let's get to the novel.

This volume, we bought a mothership and met the dwarf twins. Good job, Hiro! The crew keeps growing!

Also, why don't you just go die, bro? Let the girls live, but you, specifically, need to die. The dwarf twins look so cute in the illustrations that my seething jealousy toward Hiro only grows stronger. And I'm the author!

The bonus content this time around tells us more about the twins' pasts as well as some new developments. For those who read the afterword first, look forward to that!

Now, let's get to the part where I talk about the setting in ways I can't expand on in the story. This time, let's talk about faster-than-light travel in the *Reborn* universe. There are two basic distinctions here: regular faster-than-light drive, and hyperdrive.

Regular FTL is based on gravity and mass, using a special device that fakes the ship's mass for instantaneous acceleration beyond the speed of light. Compared to hyperdrive, the technological hurdles are much lower, but one always faces the risk of slamming into asteroids or space debris and badly damaging your ship. To deal with that, shield technology was developed. Inertial control systems eventually developed into mass control systems, which became FTL drive technology as we know it.

Meanwhile, hyperdrive uses hyperlanes that connect star systems. By entering one, you can reach faraway systems much faster than with the regular FTL drive. When precise radar was made for use in FTL drive, elementary hyperspace radar was also developed, which led to the discovery of hyperlanes. Further research resulted in the technology that allows them to enter hyperlanes and use them for travel. However, hyperspace travel remains in the development stages; each faction is still researching it.

Regular FTL drive is usually used for travel within a system, while hyperdrive is used for travel between systems. Many spaceships are equipped with both technologies. A lot of it is ambiguous, but this is the gist of how faster-than-light travel works in *Reborn*'s universe. There are actually more methods, but we can talk about that another time.

Well, I think it's about time I get going.

Thank you to my manager, K; our illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book.

I'll see you in Volume 6! C'mon, release Volume 6! Bye!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter